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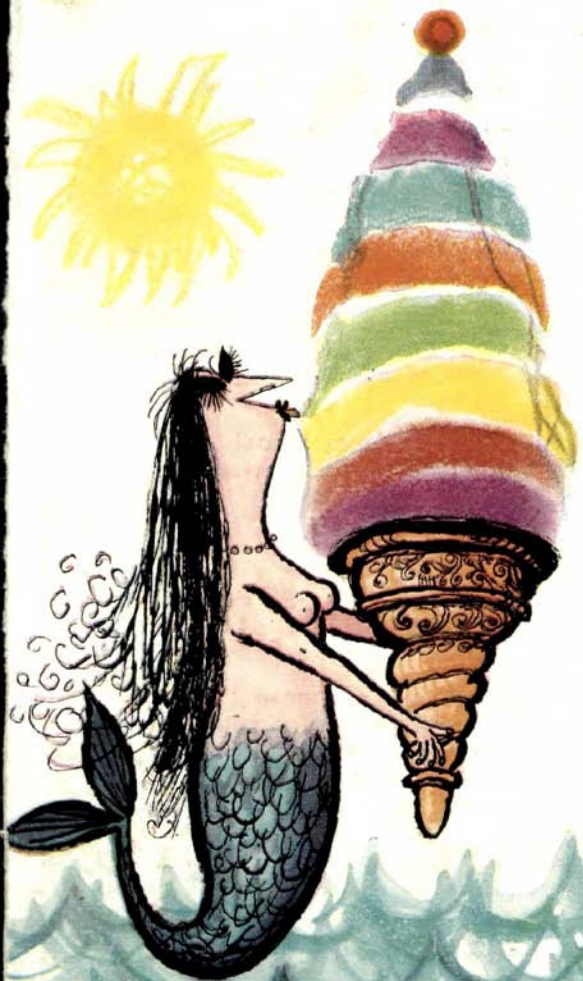

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Acknowledgements are due for permission to reprint copyright material: to J. M. Dent for the Ogden Nash verse from "Parents Keep Out"; to Faber and Faber for the Lawrence Durrell story from his forthcoming collection, "Sauve Qui Peut"; to Hamish Hamilton for the Jacques-Yves Cousteau extract; to Heinemann for lines from "The Lyrics of Noël Coward"; to Macmillan for the W. S. Hart story from "Summer's Tales 2"; to Methuen for the poem from "The Best of Dorothy Parker"; to John Murray for the Arthur Grimble extract; the extracts from the book "How to Win Over Your Children" are by Mary Bolté, illustrated by Bill Mauldin

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by Christopher Davis

Man of Affairs

WE met by appointment near the church called Trinità dei Monti. Having counted on the unexpected—his voice on the telephone told me he was small, neat, fussy, so I expected him to be burly—I discovered him to be small and neat and to wear a fussy little moustache. He also had the grey bowler he had told me about as identification, and a grey topcoat with a grey-velvet collar, and black shoes with Rome as far as St. Peter's reflected upside-down in the toe of each.

"Mr. Vicenza?"

"Good, good," he said, looking me over. His face was brown and leathery, lined all over yet filled as tightly and neatly as a little brown nut; the bright white eyebrows and the moustache, silver, twisted and fixed with wax, glowed in the sunset. "Fine," he murmured. "Yes." He waved a leaf-brown hand at Rome lying below the Spanish Steps, not himself looking where the hand pointed. "Lovely? What do you think of that? A vista and a half."

His English was excellent. It had seemed so on the telephone, and I wanted to ask at once why he had bothered about my advertisement, what need he had of English lessons, but I was too shy and too scared the fish would get away, so I gazed, grinning a little, into the twilight-filled well of the Steps, nodding. "Beautiful," I said. "It's wonderful with those azaleas all over—"

"At Easter. No. I think it's not. Such an awful, odour-making clutter, and such colours!" As if with reluctance, he

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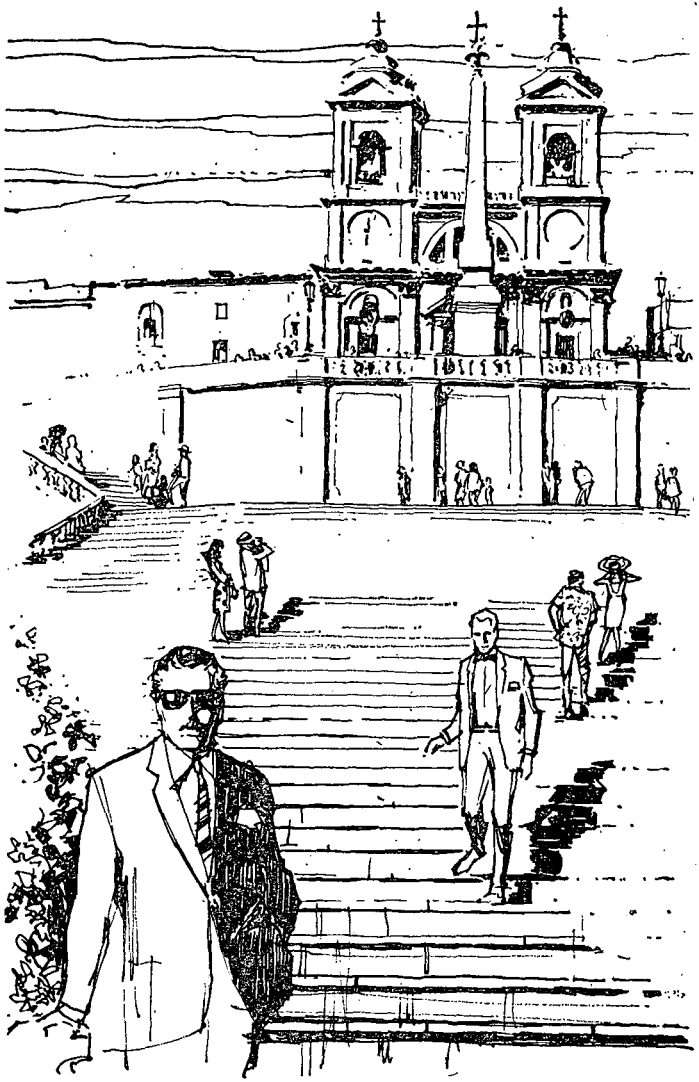

Only in Rome could a lesson in
English involve an American,
an Italian and a lovely girl

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took his quick grey eyes from me and started down the Steps at a brisk pace, addressing me over his shoulder as I followed: "The Keats House is over there on your left. See the plaque."

"I know—"

"'When I have fears that I may cease to be—' Twenty-six years old only. How old are you, Green?"

"Twenty-two."

"Good, good." *Bene, bene,* he would always say in Italian. I thought: a speech habit. But looking back, I think he meant what he said literally. He gave the flower vender opposite the Bernini fountain a sharp look. "All right, then." He bought a cornflower and, sticking out his lower lip with concentration, fixed it in his lapel. "Cornflowers. Forget-me-nots, but not azaleas."

He led me rapidly down the Via del Babuino, nodding right and left. "English tea-room. Not bad, but dear. Excellent tailor there. Our Roman clothes are the best. I buy my hats over there in that little shop. That man, Biondo, has good eighteenth-century prints of Rome and a few genuine Etruscan pieces and lots of—junk?"

"What?"

"I want the American word."

"Junk, I guess."

"He will cheat you in any case. I buy my shirts over there. See that restaurant? One of the most expensive in Rome and I found a spider in my spinach. That man standing in his shop door is a forger of paintings."

When we reached the Piazza del Popolo, he chose his café table with care and sat down, sighing and smiling in the attitude of a man who has reached a harbour. "Good. Fine. Swell?"

I stared.

"I want the American word."

"Well—swell."

He ordered two iced camparis, then addressed me in a business-like tone.

"You guess my secret, of course. I want to learn American, as distinct from English. You observe that my English is good —good enough for all practical purposes, anyhow. I am in the exporting business—cotton, which I buy up in various parts of the Mediterranean, and which, until recently, I shipped to England. Now I have American orders and I want to speak exact American. For example: the clients when they come to

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Rome. I greet them personally at the Excelsior or the Eden and I say?" He peered into my eyes.

"Well—you say—" I frowned. Now the fish would get away. "You say, 'How do you do? I am Mr. Vicenza.'"

"That's English!"

"It's the same."

"No, no, no." He looked irritated. "I know better, Green. They are nearly distinct languages. First cousins, perhaps, but distinct. Another thing is that I want an American to tell me all about America and, inasmuch as you said in your advertisement that you are a writer, all about American writers. Criticism is my hobby, and I have now arrived at the criticism of American literature."

It looked good. I said, "I know something about that."

He surveyed me again in that appraising, nearly admiring way that had come close to unnerving me earlier. "Good, good. That's what I want. The fresh viewpoint, unspoiled by success."

"I wish I was spoiled by success."

He showed a row of white teeth under the glowing moustache. "You're right. You imply that success spoils those who will be spoiled in any case, and I agree. I wish you success in your work. Can you guess something?" He had thrown his head back, disposing of the subject of success, and was gazing straight up into the sky, the taut, wrinkled-nut face shining. "You can't, I'll bet?" He rolled his gaze sideways to me, proud of the phrase. "I'll bet a million you can't guess something. I once jumped out of an airplane with a parachute—only two years ago, and I am today sixty-three years old—in order to see Rome in that way. Can you believe it? No-one believes that, but it is true. I could produce the pilot of the plane tomorrow." Staring up into the sky, he suddenly trilled a complicated bird call. "I'm happy. I do that when I'm happy, and now I'm happy thinking of American authors and of learning American. What a fine silence here, despite the Roman—traffic?"

I nodded.

"Do you know the silence at twilight when the swallows go to their nests? Like a cloister, isn't it? Once, in that silence, there was one swallow left (I was walking in the Largo Argentina) and *pat* like a dive bomber right on my new hat—a homburg. That to me was a precise definition of the most humanity may hope for in beauty—but I am cynical."

I laughed and he joined me, his grey eyes bright on my face.

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"Yes. Excellent, isn't it? Wasn't that a perfect moment of its kind? I adore irony. You'll want to discuss price, of course."

"What?"

"For the lessons. And we must decide how often they will take place."

"Well, at your convenience."

"Of course. My work is arranged so all of my afternoons are free, and I am free too, then, to indulge my hobby. Come now, Americans are not generally shy in matters of business, and this is not a complicated matter." He made a picture with his hands of complicated business by interlacing the fingers and twisting them. "However, don't ask too much."

"I thought—" I felt myself blush "—about a thousand. *Lire*."

"Ah. *Lire*. You thought that. Yes." He trilled a bird song. "Well, that is too much, you know."

We talked back and forth. Vicenza changed the subject, ordered two more camparis, mentioned price again in a delicate oblique way. We settled at last on seven hundred, and decided that we would meet for two hours each afternoon Monday to Friday—that he would come at three, leave at five. It meant thirty-five-hundred *lire* a week, which was nearly all of my room rent. We beamed at each other.

I said, "Well."

He said, "And we'll begin straightaway—tomorrow?"

"Yes." I grinned. "By saying 'right away' or 'immediately,' instead of 'straightaway,' which is English."

"*Is* it? Now, I thought that was American."

It had grown dark. Vicenza paid for the drinks and rose. "Do you have other pupils?"

"Not yet."

"Don't take any. I will occupy your afternoons. You will use your mornings, when you are fresh and creative, to write."

I said slowly, "All right. I'll think about it, anyway. Maybe you're right."

"Have you got a girlfriend?"

"No." I was startled. "I mean I did, but—"

"It's none of my business. You are better off, I think. A serious author avoids distractions and buys his amusements when he can afford them. Right?"

"I don't think so necessarily—"

"I will come to your rooms for the lessons. The address in the advertisement?"

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"I could come to your house."

"You miss the point. I want to go to America. I don't want America to come to me."

Returning to the Villa Torlonia area where I lived, I was at first jubilant; then I thought: "But he's coming to my room," and my joy, as I watched the headlight of a Vespa racing the bus, turned grey.

My room was large and high, with floors of composition marble, waist-high panelling stained dark brown, and sepia photographs of Roman scenes and of a smiling barefoot boy with a fish on a string that, like the boy, smiled. The room had a hotplate for cooking and, through large double windows, an excellent view of the Villa Torlonia's gardens. The landlady, Signora Nelli, a placid widow with neither curiosity nor imagination, left me to myself; the rent was low—eight and a half dollars a week—and the other tenants silent and invisible. I had come to look upon the room as something more of my own possession than the things in it that were actually mine to carry off; and when I was away from it for a time—a weekend, say—I would become uneasy, homesick I suppose; and when I returned to it, standing in its doorway and greeting each of its familiar features with affection, I, who had never lived in a place half as attractive or a quarter so much my own, would sigh with pleasure and relief. It was this that made me uncomfortable about the lessons: the prospect of sharing my room, even though it was only for ten hours a week.

At just three the next afternoon I heard Vicenza's happy bird warble below my window and, a moment later, a knock on my door.

"You heard my whistle? I deliberately whistled to warn you of my imminence." He entered the room, church-like in its saffron mid-afternoon light, sat down on one of the two chairs, and looked around appreciatively. "Very pleasant. A student's room in which the character of the student stands flatteringly revealed. I lived in a similar one when I attended the University."

I was pleased and, seeing my smile, Vicenza nodded knowingly. "Yes. There was a very small girlfriend then—a blonde, I recall. Yes." He squinted into the past. "I used to smuggle her into my room because the landlady was so severe about *morality*." He laughed. "I suppose landladies the world over are like that. They are all hopelessly frustrated and secretly in love with the young men, their clients—boarders, isn't it—and jealous of them."

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I said, "Well, Signora Nelli's the exception. She doesn't care one way or the other."

"No? That's your landlady? Well." He gave the room and its contents another glance, crossed his neat legs in a swift movement, and began to speak in Italian. "How long have you lived in Rome?"

"Around three months. I lived in Florence for a year."

"I find Florence rather closed in. Don't you get the feeling there's a roof over the entire city? Well. Your Italian is reasonable, but the accent—" He smiled sadly into the grey bowler, which he held in his hands. "Then I ask myself: how does he manage to support himself all these months—this unpublished writer? But, of course, you worked and saved, and then borrowed, too. Right? But now, at a crucial moment, the great work must stand still because the bank account has so dwindled that you must choose between returning home and taking pupils. There is a great work?"

My gaze turned automatically to the desk beside the window. Then I blushed.

"Good, good." His eyes studied me, seemingly fascinated. "Good. You could write an essay on the subject of the out-at-elbows American student in Rome and perhaps sell it. No? That's not creative. Please believe I intend no irony. Irony." He sighed. "I think you are courageous to live as you do, and I, knowing I could not do so, admire you for it. The exigencies have made me one of life's moral cowards. But never mind that." The taut nut-brown face glowed happily in my room's golden light. He returned to English. "Now to work. I'm quite ready." And after a long moment during which I could only stare at him: "Nothing?"

"I don't know how to begin."

"Only begin! I want to hear an American who is a writer talk about American writers. Tell me about Steinbeck who has won that great prize, as our beloved and magnificent Quasimodo did. Do you like Steinbeck?"

"Well—"

"But Hemingway, too, has been such an influence, so much more than the others, really. And Faulkner. And what about the younger people? We read them in Italian, when there are translations. I, of course, read them in the original. The trouble is that there is such a multiplication of them. Where *does* one begin? I see your dilemma, Green. Do you know —of course you couldn't—that I once met your Gertrude Stein. And she said to me, 'Vicenza, when one really begins

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to write, one leaves off thinking.' Perhaps we could use the same method in our discussions on writing."

I laughed.

"I'm serious. Don't think at all. Simply begin. Arbitrarily and without thought. Say something."

I gazed at him stupidly, and then suddenly relaxed and began to talk. It was, I was sure, good talk, though I now remember very little of what we said. Vicenza was beyond doubt brilliant. He was encyclopædic about literature—that is, about all of the literature of all of Western Europe as far as I could tell; he had absorbing and original theories of his own, which he appeared to create on the spur of the moment, and which he presented with utter, almost chilly clarity. I discovered myself talking better than I ever had in my life, coming up with thoughts I never dreamed were in my mind, because, in the old-fashioned way, Vicenza had drawn me out. I felt I should have paid him and I said so.

He smiled, standing in my door. "The arrangement is exactly right. But I'm glad you mention the matter. To be frank, Green, I can pay your fee by the day or give you the lot each Friday. Only say."

I told him, hesitating, that I preferred the money on a daily basis, and at once he drew a few notes from his wallet and placed them on the desk. "Goodbye, then. So long?"

"So long."

I heard his bird whistle down the stairs and again on the street outside. When I looked at the notes I discovered there was a thousand *lire*.

Next day I mentioned it.

"Good, good. It was no mistake," he said, with a pleased expression. "I had already decided that if the first lesson went well I would pay the amount you originally asked."

The lesson went well that afternoon, too, with me doing most of the talking this time and Vicenza, perched on a chair in the grey topcoat he refused to remove, holding his grey bowler, throwing in an occasional stimulating question or remark.

In the meetings that followed, however, I frequently faltered and went dry (the Stein Method did not always work) and then, smoothly, Vicenza would take over and plunge us both into talk that was icily refreshing in its rationality and always excitingly in motion. Thoughts grew from thoughts, were sustained like Indian clubs between us, flashing, constantly changing and developing, so that neither of us knew or much cared where we were going or where we would end.

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At length, to end our sessions, he always sighed and said, "Dear Saint Benedetto Croce, hear us and be lenient," and smiled beatifically at me and at my room.

By the end of the first week, certain I had received more information and benefit than I had given and in clear possession of five thousand *lire*, I experienced a sense of pleased guilt. Obviously, Vicenza was not only a scholar but a man with rare insight into the mysteries of creative literature and into the problems of the creative writer. I got into the habit, immediately on his departure, of jotting down what seemed to me the most significant ideas that had developed during the afternoon. The sessions, I realised, were becoming necessary to me, and after two weeks I learned to dread the weekends when I not only had to face my grudging typewriter, but to face an empty afternoon as well. Vicenza had become my teacher and my single friend in Rome; and at last I admitted that the value of my room had increased because I had shared it.

About the man himself I learned little. I knew he was an exporter of cotton and cotton products, had gone to the University of Rome, had lived in England and in Trieste and Paris, that he disliked planes and boats for travelling, and that he had earned some kind of title. He joked about it, calling himself from time to time, casually, Commander or Cavalier or, once, with a small secret smile, Prince—so that it was impossible to know the truth. I also learned that he had a wife and two grown daughters, both of whom were married and neither of whom had children. His wife he referred to only once and then, in his odd wry way, as "that elderly lady who shares my house."

On a sunny Monday afternoon—the bougainvillaea on the Villa's walls had begun to bloom—Vicenza appeared at my door and handed me a paperbound book.

"You have heard of its author but not the work."

I took in the title—*Uomini d'affari*—then gaped at the name under it: VITTORIO VICENZA. "Is it yours?"

"Don't be jealous, Green. I published it myself." He removed his hat and sat down with it in his hands. "Let the lesson begin."

"But when did you write it?"

"Years ago. When I was no older than you are. And even in those days, by way of contrast with your own situation, I could afford to indulge a sense of self-importance by having it printed." He gazed out of the window, apparently at the

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bougainvillaea, the little ironic smile on his lips, the moustache bright. "I recall that the applause was nearly inaudible; but do you know who liked it a little and was kind enough to say so?" He glanced at me. "Our good friend Dr. Croce. Now there was a serious moment in one's life. So long ago, however—so very many years..."

"Croce! This is wonderful!" I cried. I was turning over the pages of the book. "And it's a novel!"

"Yes." The wistful tone had gone, and he was looking at me now in his fascinated way. "I bring it to you for your opinion. The copy, its pages still uncut, is a gift. Take as long as you need to read it; and if you have nothing to say about it, then please say nothing. Certainly, by now, we respect each other enough for that. Also, if you don't feel like reading it, don't read it." He waved his expensive hat, eyes glowing and contented.

"Have you written anything since?"

"No. Now the lesson," he said gently.

As soon as he had gone I read the novel. It was short—a hundred and twenty pages of large print—and I finished it in a little over an hour. Then I read it again.

The next afternoon I waited impatiently for Vicenza's sprightly whistle, but this time there was none. When I answered the knock at the door I found that my scholar-author-businessman was not alone.

"I want you to meet," Vicenza said in Italian, "Signorina Cianese. Lotti, this is my teacher of American, Mr. Green."

I was confused and I must have shown it because Vicenza raised his brows slightly. I said at last, "*Piacere,* signorina," and smiled at her. I had not fully realised how strong was the habit of the room and myself and Vicenza, with no-one else; not even once had Signora Nelli interfered with our talks. The girl was young and had heavy black hair, which she wore tied in a pony-tail that reached to her waist; she was as pretty as a film starlet. To acknowledge the introduction, she had nodded without speaking and then moved to the nearest chair. My eyes kept resting on her face, dropping to her full figure, and jumping nervously away. Vicenza watched her, too. She rummaged in a large straw bag, found cigarettes, and lit one.

"Miss Cianese," said Vicenza, "will join our class this afternoon."

She crossed her fine legs and looked idly about the room.

I asked, still confused, "Shall we speak in Italian?"

"No. I want her to hear English—that is, American. I am

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teaching her the language." The expression in his eyes appeared to be compounded of his habitual wryness and stubborn fondness. He said, addressing me but watching her, "She is a slow learner."

I began to talk about the novel.

"You liked it?" Vicenza asked. He sounded surprised. "I suppose it has enthusiasm to recommend it."

"No," I said. "More than that. Much more. It's fine. I was deeply moved by it. By the character of Carlo, with his perfect brutality—and the schoolteacher: his, you know, inarticulateness." With the girl there it was hard to say the things I had rehearsed. It all sounded flat and formal.

Yet, clearly, Vicenza was pleased; he sat straight on the edge of my bed, his gaze shifting from the girl down to his gleaming little shoes, then back again. "You hear that, Lotti? Green says my novel is fine. You didn't know I was a novelist, did you?"

The girl said, "*Come?*" and looked irritable.

Vicenza repeated the words in Italian.

"Oh. No, no. I didn't know." She searched for an ashtray, and I found one, and gave it to her.

I said to Vicenza, "You should go on writing."

He replied politely, "Really? Perhaps you're right." He addressed the girl. "Should I write another novel, Lotti?"

Miss Cianese shrugged.

"I'm serious," I said. "This one—*Uomini d'affari*—should be reprinted by that big Milan house. It ought to be translated into English, too. *Men of Affairs. The Businessmen.*"

"Well, well. Perhaps. Perhaps you will do it, Green. Now let's get on to the lesson."

I decided to be dogged about it. "The lesson will be about your novel. It was thirty years ahead of its time when you wrote it, and that was why it wasn't appreciated in a popular way."

"And you feel it would be appreciated now?" Vicenza, for a moment, looked solemn, but then he made a gesture. "Really, Green, we risk boring our guest if we discuss this. I am in earnest."

The rest of the session went badly. The girl said nothing and Vicenza seemed abstracted. In a lifeless way he told his story about parachuting from a plane and landing just outside Rome in a field of sharp stones and poppies; it was clear the girl had heard the story before. There were long silences, during which all three of us stared out of my windows at the

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traffic and at the flowering wall across the street. Twenty minutes before the meeting was due to end, Vicenza rose.

"I think we'll take our leave now." Both he and the girl shook my hand.

He peered at my eyes for a moment in his fascinated way and asked, "You really liked it?"

I said I did.

He sighed, tossing the rich hat in his hand. "Well, well. Good. I will inscribe your copy for you one day."

Thereafter, for a week, Miss Cianese came with Vicenza to every lesson. She always sat in the same chair, smoking English cigarettes and looking out of the window. Occasionally, she would sigh, to show that she was bored, and when she did, both my eyes and Vicenza's darted to her fearfully. She was given to yawning, too, in a frank, loud, jaw-cracking way that halted conversation. When she was entirely silent Vicenza's gaze would wander to her, appraising her, often resting on her for minutes at a time while our discussion languished and unwound and ultimately died. Whenever she seemed too gloomy and restless Vicenza would cut the session short. I did not discuss his novel again, and Vicenza appeared to have forgotten his promise to inscribe it for me.

One afternoon he appeared alone. He announced himself with a perfunctory bird warble on the stairs, kept his hat on and his topcoat, though it was warm, buttoned up tight.

"I have a favour to ask." He did not look at me.

"Sit down. Where's the signorina?"

"Nearby." He remained standing. "It's about Miss Cianese—Lotti." He paused. "That is, we are lovers."

I said nothing.

"That is, to be explicit," Vicenza went on; "we are not yet lovers."

I said idiotically, "I'm sorry."

"These first fine spring days are, in a manner of speaking, the introduction to our affair. Of course, I have known Lotti for a long time. I knew her father, as a matter of fact, though he is now dead and naturally—" Vicenza sighed in a desperate way "—I no longer know him. Lotti and I . . . well, the difficulty is that Lotti lives with her mother, who is—can you guess? And only in the afternoons can she find some degree of freedom to . . . be herself . . . to be . . . in love." He cleared his throat. "I have several times offered to rent a flat—apartment?—but she refuses. She's ashamed and she says such circumstances would depress her. She is easily made sad.

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Also, looked at coldly, to rent an apartment would be a mistake for me as I am well-known in Rome, and privacy, which one values so, would be out of the question then. You see? It occurred to me recently that nothing could be safer—more discreet—than just such a place as yours." He turned. "As this. A student's room where one takes lessons or merely chats about literature. Harmless."

I stared at him.

"You mean you want my room?"

"Oh, no." His tone was reassuring. "I want us to go on as we have been. Your room is yours, of course. But it occurred to me that now and then, if you feel you wish to, you could absent yourself." He shrugged. "Take a stroll. It's spring. The streets and gardens are lovely. Only for the two-hour period, which in any case is reserved time, paid for."

"I'd rather not," I said.

"Just as you say." He fixed his fascinated eyes on me.

"I'm afraid I couldn't."

"You value your privacy as I do, then? You feel it would be an invasion?"

"More or less. I'd just rather not."

"It's as you say. We'll forget I mentioned it."

He went to the door, glanced at his watch and paused, as if struck by a new idea. "See here, Green. Would it be too much if just today...?" He looked very uncertain and nervous, like a small boy asking for something and knowing he will be refused. "She's waiting on the street, Green. Lotti is really extremely shy. I discover to my considerable horror that I am rather shy myself." And then, still addressing the watch: "You must find this deeply embarrassing. I know I would in your place." He laughed slightly, sadly. "It turns out that I'm imploring you, Green."

I had fully and firmly intended to say no again. I was not embarrassed; I was enraged. But instead—I think it was some memory of the novel, of the character of the schoolteacher in it—I said, "All right."

"Thank you. We will not forget."

I pushed past him. As I walked down the stairs I heard the warbling bird call, and on the street outside I ran into Lotti. The whistle had been her signal. I nodded, feeling, against my will, righteous and put-upon; she gave me a cold glance and turned into the building.

I returned at five-thirty and found the room empty and spotless—too spotless; not as I had left it. On the bedside table

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was a typed note: *Grazie, caro* Green. V. My own typewriter had been used. Under this was a ten-thousand-*lire* note. Vicenza's novel was propped open against the bed lamp, and he had inscribed it in English: *Rome, April 6. To my dear good American Green, upon a happy occasion, this work is offered to show the affectionate esteem in which he is held by his friend Vittorio Vicenza*—the signature in such elaborate Italian copperplate that if I had not known whose it was I could not have read it.

I waited a week. I tried to work, but now it was nearly impossible in that room. When it was clear that Vicenza did not intend to resume his lessons, I ran the advertisement again, and again I waited. There were no replies.

Once, in the currently fashionable Café Netto off Porta Pinciana, I recognised Lotti. She sat looking indolent and beautiful, the dark pony-tail of hair tumbling to her waist, a frosty cocktail raised in mocking salute to the blond man (it was not Vicenza) opposite her. I nodded from the sidewalk but Lotti, remote as a nun behind her moth-wing sunglasses, did not respond.

A month later, having spent the afternoon at the American Embassy trying to borrow the fare to the United States (they were willing to stake me to New York, but argued that I should make my own way to Omaha), I took the long way around to Trinità dei Monti for one of a series of final looks at my beloved Steps; and there, as if each had been waiting in the vast backstage of Rome for his cue to step under this particular spotlight, Vicenza and I confronted one another.

"Green! Well met!"

At once he took my arm and led me down towards the gorgeous fountain and the nearest café, talking non-stop as before: "Your young John Keats died there. Incredible maturity of outlook: 'My spirit is too weak; mortality/Weighs heavily on me like unwilling sleep.' And then: 'My heart aches, and a drowsy numbness pains/My sense.'" He gestured to accompany the recitation, but the gestures seemed cryptic and it was obvious that his mind was not on his words. Later, in the mahogany and cut-velvet café into which he had led me, I saw how his taut brown-nut face had fallen flaccid and how the bright darting eyes were grown dull.

"I have not been entirely well," he said, when I asked. "Troubles. Business. Family. I won't bore you with details. And you? I see your advertisement now and then."

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I told him.

"Ah. I'm sorry, Green. I know you wanted to make a go—is that the usage? A go of it. I too, you know. I wanted to make a go of it." He sighed. "Well, well. Well, well."

We drank sweet vermouth and soda and fell into a sighing silence, hypnotic and self-perpetuating, until Vicenza roused himself to break it, and said in a soft, somehow old, voice, "You remember Lotti? Well, we're finished: *kaput*. She has a German now, so I employ his sort of word." I thought of the tall pink-faced blond. "He is young," Vicenza went on, "and a partner in a firm of manufacturers of heavy farm equipment—a successful family concern." He glanced at me; in every aspect, even to the twisted ends of the white moustache, he seemed frayed. "Well, well, well. A tough break. Right? Tough. You will recall, *caro* Green, that last day? Yes. That was, apparently, too much for poor Lotti. Too—forgive me—squalid. I had hoped that would be our beautiful beginning, and so it seemed at first that day. However..." He broke off and after a moment continued in an emotional tone. "I don't blame you, Green; a man's home is his castle, and I must thank you again for the gift of that brief hour. Brief. Bitter too, as all final hours are. It was—what do you say? My swan song. Yes, my swan song, Green, though I didn't know it then."

And again I heard the heavy evening silence in the café.

In parting I told him how grateful I was for the inscription in the book; I did not mention the ten-thousand-*lire* note.

"Not at all. Okay. You're welcome," he said with deep sadness. "Good luck, my dear Green."

"Wait." And then, at last, I asked: "You didn't want lessons at all, did you? I mean, not even at first?"

He fixed me with his sad old gaze, then he murmured, "No. I wanted Lotti, Green. I still do. I tell you the truth now, and the truth is that I only meant to use you—your room. I am sorry. Lotti said I was a coward for what I did—to you, to her. She said I made you a pimp and her a whore because I was too afraid to speak my love to the world. I was not a man with her, she said. So she left me."

I watched him ascend the Steps. He made the first dozen of them briskly enough, but then he faltered, stopped, put a narrow hand to his side and breathed deeply, after which he tried a few more, paused, ascended again, until I lost sight of him in the grey-green magical haze that drops like a cloak over the Spanish Steps at twilight.

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Lawrence Durrell

This unique man is the poet and novelist whose world-famous "Alexandria Quartet" — "Justine", "Balthazar", "Mountolive" and "Clea" — is recognised as one of the great literary achievements of our time. But beneath the serious Durrell is an imp, a mischievous imp, who is expressed in occasional tongue-in-the-cheek short stories which are narrated by one of the dimmer lights of the Diplomatic Corps, by name Antrobus . . . And here is the latest Antrobus tale

MORE than once (said Antrobus), have I seen my Chief shaken, sometimes even brought close to breaking point: but you should have seen his face when intelligence came that his Aunt Norah was heading south towards Vulgaria, leaving a train of carnage behind her in Paris and Rome.

It was a cruel thing to happen to him, particularly at his time of life with retirement so near. Yes, he was old by then, a somewhat battered repaint; but this bit of news soon had him skipping like a stag. In those days he was rumoured to wear Dunlopillo trousers so that he could sit down without bruising his ideas—but this was mere malice on the part of Dovebasket.

Aunt Norah now . . . Of a sudden he was sad, bowed; he lowered his undercarriage and trimmed his flaps and cried "No!" once, just like that, "No!"

I cannot disguise the fact from you that she had gone a little queer in the head with the passage of the years. At first she was mildly eccentric; but what got her turned off clear

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was that she happened upon some Labour Party pamphlets and was at once captivated by their attitude to sex. I mean about having lots more about and teaching it to the under-fours and so on; and to have pictures of Bernard Shaw over the nuptial bed to promote conception.

I don't know. I never took a lot of it in myself. Rum stuff, I found it; in places, downright unmannerly. But that is what Labour stands for, they say.

Well anyway, the scales fell from Aunt Norah's eyes when she read Shaw on how to be more all-embracing. Why Shaw, I wonder? Nobody came down with powder markings after kissing him, did they? Anyway, she was converted and decided to promote the good cause by lecturing on sex to the young of foreign nations, starting with the French.

Of course, the trouble is that you can't illustrate sex for young people as clearly as you can Euclid; the human body has too few acute angles or hypotenuses—or so they say. But she did her best. Her huge diagrams looked like a study of the internal measurements of the Grand Pyramid: there were logarithms, isotherms, isobars and heavy-pressure belts like a weather forecast. It was impressive.

We first heard of traffic jams and cheering crowds and police charges in Paris. The French love intellectual diversions and here she was: she lectured from a table covered in a Union Jack and with a bull-terrier called Bernard tied to the leg. She had trained it to growl at various points in her lecture, as if to give point to it.

Of course, all this may have seemed a bit strange to them, but then everyone knows that the British have their own way of doing things.

So now Aunt Norah was heading south after tearing Rome apart. 'Can storied urn or animated bust . . .' I reflected, as I saw my Chief sitting there with bowed head, looking as if he had been passed through muslin and was weak and fizzy enough to be sipped through a straw.

"I will hand over the administration of the secret fund for ONE WHOLE WEEK to whoever can think of a way to stop her," he vowed.

Naturally, such an idea had great appeal and many were the ideas tried out. De Mandeville, pushed for lolly as always, hit upon a notion that almost worked. He and his chauffeur dressed up as Carmelites and delivered an *aide mémoire* to the Vulgarian F.O., protesting about her being allowed in on

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religious grounds. The Vulgarians were somewhat shaken, but stood firm. I think they had glimpsed the suède hacking-shoes underneath his gown, or perhaps the rosaries looked dubious.

Anyway, Polk-Mowbray's alarm communicated itself to all of us; we grew morose, edgy, jumpy. After prayers one day, De Mandeville struck his head on a beam and was knocked almost insensible; we had to give him the kiss of life with a bicycle pump. When he came to, he confessed that he thought he saw Aunt Norah advancing down the drive, hence the jump. Just to show you what a state we were in.

Meanwhile, the lady herself was advancing methodically on the Vulgarian capital in a large caravan with HURRAH FOR SEX on one side, and GLORY TO THE POPULATION BULGE on the other. She pursued her leisurely course across the smiling countryside, stopping in the little towns to dish out pamphlets and fertility charms and harangue the multitudes.

Of course, they couldn't understand... and this is where Dovebasket earned a whole week of the secret fund. His face ablaze with joy, he rushed into the Chancery, shouting: "I've got it."

We hardly dared to hope by this time.

"We are fools," said the youth. "Aunt Norah knows not a word of Vulgarian, and who in Vulgaria knows more than the words 'whisky and soda' in our native bow-wow?"

We mulled him over a bit. "But the riots in Paris and Rome, the march on Florence—how was this achieved, for clearly she knows neither French nor Italian?"

Dovebasket whinnied. "Of course. *Interpreters.* We must offer her official interpreters and then suborn them. While she thinks she is throwing them into a fine lather with her sex palaver, they can be reading strips of Holy Writ like Engels or Kingsley Martin. In this way we will save our souls."

Polk-Mowbray had tears in his eyes. "I believe you have it, my boy," he said, fishing out the key and handing it over. "Now we must find the interpreters—there is no time to lose. Yea, go out, Antrobus, and find me two little Vulgarians with flared nostrils and ears too close to the head—men with the bad breath of taxmen or Marxists."

For once I saw the road clear. "Aye, aye, sir," I said; and so the whole matter fell out. Aunt Norah had one of the most successful rallies of her tour and, apart from us all being deafened by Engels, all was well.

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Roald Dahl

The writer who gets paid for what he throws away

by STEPHEN MERRICK

I WENT into a hut in a five-acre field and the man in the sleeping bag said, pointing: "Sit there, you'll just about squeeze in." The hut was 12ft by 8ft; Roald Dahl, in the sleeping bag, is 6ft 6ins; I am not short. It did not matter. Squeezed in, I got what I wanted: a close-up of the man whose short stories make pretty well the whole world shudder, and smile, yet is himself a mystery.

Such is his fame today that he is better known as Roald Dahl than as "the husband of Patricia Neal, the actress." He could hardly want more fame than that, in return for thirty short stories in his fifty years.

Famous, yes, but few know him well. People see a gentle, lovable giant and cannot understand why he has to write stories about brains in basins and fingers chopped off. This then, was my mission: to dig around Roald Dahl, with him digging too, in a search for the source of the grisly. But first, let's meet the man . . .

Sardines, packed, certainly address one another by Christian name. Formality would be ridiculous. So it was very soon with Roald Dahl and me, and would have been sooner had I known how to say "Roald."

"Impossible name, isn't it? ROO-ARLD . . . Try again.

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The last syllable like SNARLED. That's it, the worst name a writer could have. People don't remember it. Yours isn't much better. We'd both have been wiser to choose a single name. Like Saki. That sticks."

He sat in a granny's armchair, with a shawl about his shoulders; sleeping bag drawn up to his waist; feet raised on the kind of leather trunk found in attics. He talked and smiled two kinds of smile: the gentle smile of deep kindness, even tenderness; and the smile of the merry mortician. The smile, indeed, of one of his grisly stories.

"I had this place built as a workroom to get away from the house and the children. I made a mistake and had it built on the cheap. It's terribly cold even at this time of year—hence the sleeping bag and a couple of paraffin stoves."

People who read books, unashamed, know how to picture the Successful Writer. Leather-topped dark desk. Leather-booked shelves. *Who's Who.* A globe of the world and a rack of pipes; a brandy decanter and a velvet smoking jacket with black cuffs; someone running his bath.

The Successful Writer is hardly ever like this. And Roald Dahl, one of the most successful writers, is even less like it. He writes almost in the wilderness.

A writing board across his knees. A toby jug with six yellow pencils. A pencil sharpener, the kind you wind. A grey-green filing cabinet and the rough-wood bench of a potting shed. A flask of coffee. This was all, except for a small table lamp now lit, at two in the bright afternoon.

"It's always on. I always have the curtains drawn, you see, to shut out the outside world, though only an empty field. I can't understand people who can write in their gardens, or in railway stations. I suppose it's what you're used to. I couldn't concentrate. There's only one way I can work—like this..."

He showed me how he worked, step by step, from the moment he sat in his old armchair with the writing board on his knees.

"I made this board years ago and lined it with billiard cloth. I find it's easiest on the eyes. I reline it when the old cloth gets tired.

"I start the day taking the children to school, the two eldest that is: Tessa, she's nine and Theo, five. The other two are Ophelia, eighteen months, and Lucy, the baby, eight months. They're a young brood for a couple not so young. I'm fifty and Pat's forty... we married late, fourteen years ago.

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"It's 14 miles to the school and back again. I'm home by 9 a.m. and do a few chores like feeding our seventy homing budgerigars. Then I fill this flask with coffee and come up here between 9.30 and 10 o'clock.

"I drink the coffee from this wine glass. See! It's made of very thick glass, the cheap kind, but I use it because it won't bust with the hot coffee."

I butted in here and we had the first of several arguments, all pleasant, during the pleasant afternoon. I said the thicker cheap glass was more likely to bust with hot coffee, but we agreed neither of us knew for certain (I found later I was right) and we got back to his demonstration of the writer-at-work.

"All writers have their fiddles before actually starting work. I'm sure you have yours. Mine are always the same..." He went on showing me, carrying out each action as he talked.

"First I take a paper tissue and make it do two jobs. I clean my glasses with it, then lay it on my writing board so I can sharpen my pencils into it. The pencil sharpening is the real ritual, I suppose. I take these six pencils, like this, and the pencil sharpener and sharpen the pencils."

I watched him sharpen the pencils at enormous speed, with enormous fury, or so it seemed, and I thought I heard the roll of the tumbrils. Perhaps I was not far out. He went on:

"Then I take this knife and sharpen the bloody things into the paper tissue to a very fine point indeed—so sharp it would go right through you." He jabbed one at me, quite fiercely, as though to prove it.

"Then I throw the tissue into the wastepaper basket, pour some coffee and light a pipe or a cigarette, and settle to work until 12 or 12.15 when I break off for lunch.

"I work again from four to six, roughly. The rest of the time I spend gardening or mucking about, recharging my batteries which every writer must do.

"I hardly ever work in the evenings. Our evenings fly with the children: homework, playtime, bedtime. I always have a drink when I go in at 6 o'clock; then Pat and I cook up any old thing and we always have a glass of wine, however cheap.

"These are all habits, of course, but none of us could do without them."

Two hours' work in the morning, two in the afternoon. Some people would not call this a day's work; some would say a real writer works day and night, sleepless and starved but happy, in his great creative frenzy.

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Roald Dahl looks the part, all right. His clothes hang on him, shapeless. Convalescent clothes, waiting to be filled out; or the clothes of the hungry.

Roald Dahl, however, does not see himself as others see him. "I'm very worried about my weight and I know what the trouble is. I eat too much chocolate. Masses of it.

"Every day after lunch I go to a special cupboard and take out a sixpenny bar. I'm always looking out for new bars. There's a new one out this week, with a layer of crisp caramel. It's pretty good.

"D'you know, I'd love to get into the secret room they've got at Cadbury's where they think up new chocolates." I said I didn't know Cadbury's had a secret room and he said: "I don't either, but they must have."

Roald Dahl, too fat, is fantastic, so we got back to his four-hour working day as possibly being too thin.

"It doesn't seem a lot but it's enough for me if I am to keep up the very high standards I set myself. If I wrote for eight hours and finished a story twice as quickly the quality would suffer.

"Besides, I see no virtue in working more than four hours. I'd almost rather eat a little less than work for eight, so long as the family has enough to eat.

"I wonder how many writers write much more than four hours a day, averaged over a year. Some—Georges Simenon for one—work best in bursts that last a week or two, then may spend twice as long doing nothing.

"I am the plodding type. I can write only by sticking to a timetable with really savage self-discipline. I would far rather muck about in the garden—I love gardening—but I resist the temptation because I know I would suffer enormous guilt."

We have come some way since Adam, but not all that far. Adam was tempted and he did muck about in the garden and he suffered guilt. All through a woman. And Adam and Roald Dahl perhaps still have a thing in common (apart from the love of gardening) and I will come back to it later. Yes, it may have to do with women.

Meanwhile Roald Dahl must leave his garden to toil as a writer and if Adam is anywhere looking down he must certainly say: "There, but for the Grace of God . . ." Adam had to till the thorns and the thistles and the hard rock, seeking a crumb of creative good earth; and this is what Roald Dahl and every writer must do.

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Roald Dahl put it like this. "Few people who aren't writers can understand that writing is one of the hardest jobs on earth.

"They wouldn't believe how much sheer endurance, how much stamina, it demands. How much downright physical hard labour, let alone the mental labour.

"You sit, sticking it out, all alone, feeling hopeless, helpless, a total failure. You struggle for the right adjective five, ten minutes; half an hour, an hour.

"Perhaps the worst thing is this, and I think it's true of almost all writers: only very, very rarely can you think yourself any good. If people praise something you have written, you feel a fraud, believing you were just lucky, and next time you'll be found out.

"I never have any confidence that the story I am writing will be good. I am filled with wonder and surprise if it is good.

"Occasionally there's a moment, about three-quarters of the way through, when my despair lifts a little and I actually believe the story will be a good one. I am no longer bored with it, or filled with doubts, and this keeps me going.

"I love writing, I hate writing. I enjoy it when it's going well, then I remember the best tip Ernest Hemingway ever gave me: 'When it's going good, stop.' Then you feel encouraged for the next stint."

He hitched up his sleeping bag, offered me a tobacco-tin lid for an ash tray, and asked me what I thought. That he was really interested in my views, shows the kind of man he is, and I simply said I was comforted that he felt himself to be no good. It made two of us.

"It makes hundreds of us but none of us knows it," said Roald Dahl. "That's the great pity. We writers all feel deep down we're no good, but can't believe others feel the same.

"Actors mix with actors, comforting each other. Painters don't mix quite so much but they rely quite a bit on one another for encouragement and support.

"Not writers. The writer is the loneliest of men. We mix hardly at all with other writers, unless there is a great age difference. People say this is because of envy and jealousy and it's true writers can be quite childishly jealous, even spitefully so. But why? You're only jealous when you don't think much of yourself.

"Most writers don't think much of themselves, but I think those with the deepest humility, or the deepest feeling of inferiority, whichever way you look at it, are usually the best

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writers. And they hardly mix at all. The writers who go around boozing together are nearly always the inferior ones."

Roald Dahl does not think much of himself, though his stories are read in every country and he has been praised in almost every language. His outward stature was established long ago and there will be a blue plaque some day, but this has nothing to do with the bleating, shivering man inside.

Success cannot help this shivering man. Success never helps anyone for longer than say, four minutes; then you want a second helping and, with luck, you get what Oliver Twist got. Without luck, you go on and on, sniffing out the sweet smell of total success and bitter almonds.

Roald Dahl, who understands that total success and total failure are much the same, is not interested in either. He certainly does not experience the success of his international reputation in the way most people would expect. It is the same with his physical appearance. Many people, hearing he is 6ft 6ins, imagine an upright, outsize ironing-board. A magnificent man, or should be.

No. When I walked into that hut and first saw Roald Dahl I seriously thought that here was a man with not long to live. He is frail and pale and stooping. The big eyes in the gentle face seemed to look on shadows and I was so concerned that at one point I asked if he was ill.

Stupid question. Men like Roald Dahl may never be the death of the undertaking business but they can cause serious recessions. Dahl himself was made to last and he will last until heaven knows what age. He has the constitution of an ox and the Albert Memorial. Strong, apparently permanent.

"No, I'm not ill," he said, pointing to a corner. "See those dumb-bells—they weigh one-hundred pounds each and I lift them twenty times a day, legs straight. You try... well, no, perhaps not. I'm not really an enthusiast myself, it's treatment for an old back injury.

"I'm not ill, but I'm a little tired. We've had a long siege."

A two-year siege. It would have broken many men. First, the death of a daughter at the age of seven. This alone—how can a man stand it? Then his son Theo, hit by a taxi in New York when he was four months old. Eight operations.

Then last year his wife, Patricia, suffered three strokes, with her new baby daughter coming.

"I thought I'd lost Pat; now I think she'll be acting again quite soon. We've all had to work hard, getting her through, but we've done it.

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"I had all sorts of fantastic offers from magazines wanting me to write Pat's story. I refused. I hated the idea. Then the medical bills started coming in—this was in America, remember!

"I wrote Pat's story. It was hard to do, but it was widely published and now I think it's the thing I'm proudest of.

"That was the first time, by the way, I'd ever written directly for money. I don't think any real writer writes for money primarily. On this occasion, I had to."

I asked him for his potted life story and he sat back, happily digging up lost memories.

Here they are, as people would write them in *Who's Who* if they were honest:

> DAHL Roald: b: Llandaff, S. Wales, 1916. e: Repton Torture. Bottom of form all year round but got eight credits in finals. Went on expedition to help map Newfoundland. Joined oil company in East Africa—pukka sahib and all that: looking back, am ashamed to say I loved it. War. RAF. Shot down in flames ground-strafing in desert. Quite badly wounded. Washington—as assistant air attaché. Combat men so rare in Washington that magazine sent C. S. Forester to interview me. Over lunch I said: "Look, let's not bother about the interview now—we'll enjoy our lunch and I'll send you a few notes." Sent notes. Forester wrote back in effect: "Am refusing to touch your notes. Told magazine they're so good they must be published as they are under your name." Magazine did, so I became a writer, aged 29.

So much for the *Who's Who* style. I preferred the Roald Dahl style, with him having trouble with his sleeping bag but talking on just the same.

"Any fame I have rests on two books of 30 stories: *Someone Like You* and *Kiss Kiss*. Two books in twenty years. I am a very slow writer and I owe a lot to Pat. Being married to a successful actress helped me indulge the luxury of writing at my natural pace. So I took six years to write *Kiss Kiss*.

"It was pretty successful."

Theirs seems a pretty good marriage. A rare example of the give-and-take the preachers talk about. Famous actress helps struggling writer: now famous writer helps struggling actress. This stretches the facts a bit, but never mind. It

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doesn't really matter that Dahl, far from struggling, was already well-established; or that Patricia Neal, right at the top for years, and still there, has no need to struggle for anything except to get her full health back.

It would all still make a fine short story, a fine love story—but not for Roald Dahl. Why? This, the vital thing, I had yet to find out in this mission of mine. If he or I could answer that, then almost certainly we would have found the source of his need for the grisly.

"I honestly don't think I can help much," he said, beaming, and making a mess scraping out his pipe. "For one thing, I don't know I even agree with what you're saying: that whatever a writer writes must contain a bit of himself.

"Why do I write? For one thing because I want freedom. Be my own boss. I think a lot of nonsense is talked about the 'creative urge.' I never say 'I am a creative artist,' because this is death. I'd become too conscious of my audience and would start writing for people instead of for myself. No work of art is ever consciously produced for the public."

All truly honest people regularly contradict themselves, saying one minute black is white and the next minute light green. Tell them they are talking daft and they say: "Well, you know what I mean . . ." and it is clear they are not bothered at all.

Roald Dahl, by this test, is just about one of the most honest men I have met (and by every other test, too). Having said the creative urge is bunk, he went on:

"I chose writing because it gives me great satisfaction, you know, to create something and finish it."

And having said he writes not for an audience but for himself, he goes on:

"The greatest fear I have is of boring the reader. Everything I write is guided by this. I am sure it is not a bad thing to be in fear and trembling of boring the reader; of ever having a single reader of one of my stories say: 'Oh God, what's all this rubbish about?'

"I try to entertain the public because this is the writer's first job: get your audience's attention and keep it. Once you've grasped this you find yourself cutting out whole paragraphs to get quicker to the point."

But Roald Dahl is not the only honest man around. I can, looking back on our interview, recall not only contradicting myself but actually saying things I knew even at the time I didn't mean. I believe this often happens to writers; our job

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is writing and we care about this. Talking we don't care about; but we have to talk and later ask ourselves: What the devil did I mean by that?

A psychiatrist going deep, would say Roald Dahl and I were not really inconsistent. For the writer is said to write precisely because he needs to create a unity—a novel or poem or short story—out of the inconsistencies within him.

Dame Edith Sitwell put it another way when asked in a television interview why she wrote poetry: "I suppose, in a way, it's an attempt to unite my mother and father."

And Roald Dahl put it like this: "The writer is full of inhibitions and worries and he gets rid of them in his writing. For him, writing is a self-cure. I'm sure it's true of me.

"That's why no artist of any kind should ever be psycho-analysed. He may be cured of his neurosis but he'll lose his talent and become an ordinary person."

This old wives' tale is so widespread it would hardly surprise me to hear it now from an old wife. It is copper-bottomed nonsense, despite the fact that the argument seems rational.

Psycho-analysis can help a writer to write better, it can't take away his talent. It may change what he writes about and it is possible, for instance, that were Roald Dahl to be psycho-analysed he would stop wanting to write about brains in bowls. On the other hand, he might want to write about better brains in better bowls.

I put all this to Dahl, who grinned amiably and wouldn't accept a word of it—and why should he? This brilliant man rejects what he can see no evidence for and in that he is right.

And he is brilliant. One of the "brain-drains." He is British, yet is far better known in America.

"My books' sales are four or five times as big in the US, in Western Germany and most other countries. Britain sells fewer volumes of short stories than any other civilised country —chiefly of course, because there are so few magazines publishing short stories.

"This is a pity, because I'm pretty sure that we have the best short story writers—and writers of every other kind. Anyway, an American critic said recently: 'Britain's loss is America's gain.'

"American universities seem to agree because one or two keep trying to acquire everything I write. I don't mean the final draft, but all the false starts and the crossings-out and the real nonsense.

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"See, it's empty," he nodded at his wastepaper basket. "All the stuff I used to chuck away, the absolute rubbish, I've now been asked to hang on to. There's a hell of a lot of it. Even a short story with, say, fifty pages of typescript may, with all the rewrites, be a pile of paper a foot high. Students studying the short story form are supposed to get something out of going through this stuff, though I can't think what."

I can. I asked to see one of these foot-high piles while he went out to superintend the children lighting a bonfire, to see they were safe, or so he said. Roald Dahl likes a bonfire. But I had on my lap a pile of yellow foolscap paper that will never make a bonfire. *The Last Act*—published in America early this year.

Here it all was—the work of a struggling writer as every writer must always struggle. Ruthless cutting and changing; the agony of seeking always the shortest possible word, the *one* right word. The yellow pages filled with thin, firm, writing, in pencil, sloping right. No abbreviations. Many pages cut and stuck with tape to other pages.

Above all, the obsession with detail, which marks the master. He had written: "I took a shirt, a tie, and a suit and laid them out on the bed..." He had crossed out "out."

Does it matter? Of course it matters. To the true writer every word, every comma matters. He must give his best, to the smallest detail. This is the difference between good and bad writing.

In this story two policemen call on Alice to say her husband has been killed. Now Dahl has to make the reader feel the shock she feels. First, he makes her say: "I wanted to kill myself." He crossed this out and wrote instead: "The two unfortunate policemen had their hands full trying to comfort and control me until the doctor arrived and injected something..."

You do not need to be a writer to see the difference. "I wanted to kill myself"... means nothing. We all want to kill ourselves every Monday morning. But how many of us ever have two policemen trying to control us? Note the brilliance of that word "control." And "unfortunate policemen"—that's clever too. That alone tells us almost all we need to know about the state Alice was in.

I went on, through the mass of papers, and noticed suddenly that much of the rewriting was *exactly* the same as the original. Whole paragraphs, even whole pages, apparently just copied.

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He came back from bossing the bonfire and I asked him what this meant. He didn't tell me at once, but got back into his sleeping bag, talking of other things.

"Notice I write on yellow paper, using yellow pencils. You're the psychologist, what do you make of that? I've no idea. I get it typed by a woman in the village. I can't type.

"I said I was a slow writer. Now you can see how slow. It takes me four or five months to write one story of between 4,000 and 7,000 words. I rewrite so much that fifty pages of typescript can mean five hundred of my written pages.

"You wanted to know about the rewriting. Every day I read over what I wrote the day before. I usually decide to rewrite it eight, ten or fifteen times but very often I don't alter it.

"It's obsessional, of course, but for me it's better to write the thing again than just read it through. It's very laborious, but a slow, sure way of finding out if the thing is right. But the most important thing is this: it is during this laborious rewriting that I get the happier touches; that I hit on the word or phrase I have all the time been searching for.

"I write mainly by ear, not knowing much grammar. I hope you'll never find a split infinitive in my writing but I never quite know when to use 'which' and when to use 'that.'

"I never go back, reading over my old stories. I'd be afraid of falling into the trap of self-adulation. I might think: 'Well, this stuff isn't so bad.' Then it might go to my head, as it did with Evelyn Waugh and many other writers. I want to think about the next story, not the last one."

We had talked a lot, and smoked a lot and it would soon be time to go, but I still did not know much about what went on inside Roald Dahl; I still did not know, for certain, why most of his stories had to be grisly.

"Well, what can I say about myself? It sounds silly sticking labels on, but I suppose I'm an introvert. I'm not boisterous and I don't laugh easily, I wish I did. But I'd be embarrassed to burst out laughing, so I usually keep my enjoyment of something funny inside and enjoy it there. I think people like me may enjoy humour and wit more than the people who roar with laughter.

"I am enormously punctilious, always worrying about putting other people out. For years when Pat and I were asked out to dinner I'd insist on being there at seven-thirty or whatever the time was. It's only very recently I've found out how much inconvenience we must have caused and we now turn up half an hour late, like everybody else.

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"I am also very methodical, as every writer must be. Writing is a methodical business. One word after the other, all in perfect order, nothing could be more methodical. And the less mess a writer has on his desk the better writer he is. He's frightened of getting in a mess; he's got to see everything very clearly.

"I think all writers can tackle almost anything and do it well. Ask them to paint a wall and they'll bloody well get it done, at once, and properly. They won't half do it. If I see a door handle that wants mending I have to do it at once, going out into the rain, if necessary, to get the tools. I wouldn't sleep if I didn't.

"Then I always keep promises, however much the trouble. But the trouble with people like me who will put themselves out is they expect the same high standards from others. We are often let down and this, I think, tends to show in my stories where people are more often unpleasant than pleasant.

"I don't have a good opinion of the average human. All ego. Egotism frightens me and I fight it. Egotists are such unpleasant people and I don't want to be unpleasant."

He was wrong, all wrong, in my view but I have no high opinion of my views and I didn't argue. To me, writers are not methodical, afraid of getting in a mess. We are already in a mess so frightening that we turn to the methodical for rescue. The methodical offers the thing we need desperately: the sense of certainty.

I asked Roald Dahl if he was ever depressed, and got a surprising answer. "I have plenty of small depressions all the time, but I consider depression a great self-indulgence.

"It is egotism, actually. Egotism is fear of what is going to happen to *you*. Anyone afraid of going up in an airplane is an egotist. And as I said: egotists are unpleasant people and I don't want to be unpleasant."

Roald Dahl is certainly one of the pleasantest men I have met, and he is an egotist, as every creative writer must be. He could not write if he weren't.

He did not much want to talk about the money side of his writing; he felt it was bad taste. Guessing, I would say his short stories bring him £5,000 a year, but I could be wildly out. If so, it would be not less but more.

It was now nearly time to go and I was glad Roald Dahl did not want me to go. The warmth was mutual. Besides, I still had not learned the "grisly" secret.

"I honestly don't think I can help you. I just don't know

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where this sense of the grisly comes from. I hate grisly things, I really hate them. I am a very kind-hearted, soft-hearted person. I'd never do anyone dirt and I'm sure you wouldn't.

"Actually, I'm not a serious person. It's an easier way to live. I see people all around taking ridiculous things seriously. A valuable vase gets broken and they cry out and can't forget it but I say, 'Well, that's that,' and hope to carry on normally.

"The only thing I'm concerned about is Pat and the children; teaching the children to be nice people and have good manners and take an interest in everything around.

"This not taking life seriously may have something to do with the fact that my stories, even the very grisly ones, aren't *serious*. Colin Wilson takes his writing seriously and that could, in time, become his downfall as a writer.

"I don't think I'll ever do better than *Kiss Kiss*. Change, yes; but not improve as a short story writer. Plots are terribly hard to find. The important thing is to write a plot down the moment you think of it, or it's gone. Plots are really like dreams, out of your unconscious."

He took down a tattered, battered exercise book, flicked over the pages. "This is my plot book." He showed me. Some pages, foolscap, had only two or three words. One had a pencilled scrawl, "Cat who was Liszt."

Said Dahl: "That became *Edward the Conqueror* in *Kiss Kiss*. It's one of the best-known stories I've ever written."

We were chopping and changing now, here a topic, there a topic, but still evading the issue. And Roald Dahl went on contradicting himself, as I am sure I did. "I'm not serious," he had said, but now he went on:

"I'm not a religious man, neither an atheist nor an agnostic. I can't make up my mind about these big questions, though I try hard to believe in some sort of after-life.

"I'd like to do another book before I die. I've only done two stories towards it. I'll have to do fifteen. But I'm doing other things. A couple of children's books, they're doing rather well.

"I write all my stories, not intellectually, but with emotion. I try to get in a message—yes, the grisly ones, too. It's usually something I'm feeling angry about—like cruelty to animals.

"As for the grisly—I know now I really can't help you. When I think of a grisly plot I don't say delightedly: 'Ah, this is grisly.' I say: 'This is fun.' The grisly tickles my sense of something or other, I don't know what. Like children —they love the grisly.

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"Without the humour in my stories they'd be truly grisly, beastly. That's why I get humour into them. I haven't helped you much, have I?"

But he had, and I asked him one more question: how did he regard women? He answered casually: "I like them very much and I don't regard them at all as the inferior sex, even though I happen to know there isn't anything in the world a woman can do better than a man, with the possible exception of nursing."

Then he asked me very gently: "I'm so sorry not to have helped you more. Is there nothing I can do? No more questions?"

I had another question, but did not ask it. He could not have known the answer. No writer knows the inner things which make him write.

The question: why do almost half of his stories deal with men destroyed by women? Then I saw it was the wrong question. Never mind about the grisly Dahl: what of the grisly you and me? Whatever is in him is in us and all the world. Nothing else, even his brilliant writing, can explain why the world compulsively reads him.

The grisly surely stands for the primitive parts of us we thought we had left in the jungle. They came out with us, although we did not know it; they still stay with us, in secrecy and silence. We fear the unknown, but the unknown is us.

We have the evidence in myths and legends; in children's fairy stories; in Roald Dahl, gentle writer who sharpens yellow pencils very sharp; as sharp as the teeth of the Wolf in Little Red Riding Hood.

Dahl's stories have perhaps the same meaning and purpose as Little Red Riding Hood and all the other fairy stories.

"It's only a story, it isn't serious," we tell our forest-frightened child.

And Dahl said to me, remember, "My stories, even the very grisly ones, aren't serious."

We read his stories and say, as children say: "It's only a story, it isn't real," and do not know we lie.

The grisly is real. It is real in Roald Dahl, in us. Through Dahl we can deny it; this is his gift. He can help us to say, as desperately we need to say: "This isn't serious or savage or monstrous, or to do with the jungle..."

It is only a story?

This is how Culture began.

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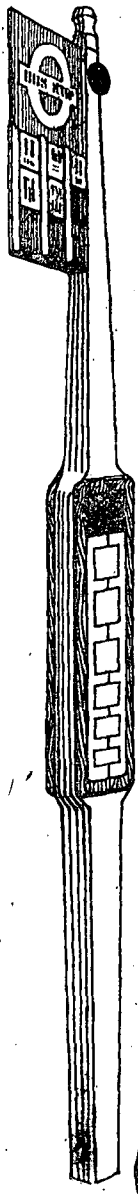


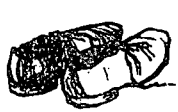
A Pair of Shoes

BY ANNE MERRILL

TONIGHT, I shall tell him about the pair of shoes waiting at the bus stop, Diane thought, as she swooshed away the dust from the hall table with the corner of a dirty tea-towel. There had been a phone number written in the dust. Usually she'd have had the presence of mind to make a note of it in the phone book, to save Nigel the indignity of having to ask where the dust had gone to with the Vice-Chancellor's phone number.

Now, as she sat in the kitchen drinking up some of last night's sherry, she rehearsed her story about the shoes. Nigel's lecture would be finished in half an hour. No need to allow time for students catching him afterwards; they no longer did. His lectures were becoming more and more abstruse as he became more withdrawn and introverted. How can you ask your tutor to make *one* point clear when the whole lecture is a muddy mass of incomprehensible jargon, going far above the heads of even the brightest first-year logic students?

The doorbell rang. That would be Nigel—he never remembered his key. She would say, "*Dar*ling, you're back!" to make a change from, "Hello, love," or perhaps, "Darling, you're *back*!" But it wasn't Nigel. A young man stood on the doorstep with a wad of file paper in his hand and a briefcase bulging with books. "Can I see Dr. Shepherd, please?"



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He was rather hesitant—nervous, perhaps.

"I'm afraid he's not back yet; I'm expecting him in a few minutes—do come in and wait. You're one of his students?"

"Yes, I'm—er—doing Philosophy, first year."

"How are you liking it?"

They were now sitting in the kitchen with the dirty laundry and the half-empty sherry bottle. She pushed a glass to him.

"Thanks. Mind if I smoke?"

"Well?"

"Oh—Philosophy is very exciting, I suppose, but difficult."

"In what way do you find it difficult?"

"Well, it's difficult to get yourself in the right mood; to listen to the Prof saying in a tutorial, for instance, 'The meaning of the statement *It is raining* depends on whether we know the meaning of the word *is*'! I sometimes feel like screaming and banging my head against the wall at times like that, you know. Or perhaps you don't?"

"Oh, I do! I've been a lecturer myself—in the same subject—and I've felt twinges of the same thing, I assure you! But to scream would be a most illogical way of answering that statement, don't you think?"

The young man blushed and smiled at her, fingering his paper. His eyes were green, with orange flecks, she noticed.

Suddenly, she wanted to talk to him; not to exchange the glib don's-wife-to-young-student stuff . . . "And how are you finding your first year at university?" . . . but really to talk.

"You know," she blurted out, "I almost made a disgrace of myself in London Road today. I burst into uncontrollable laughter at the sight of a pair of shoes. Someone had left them at a bus stop. There they were—side by side—abandoned: waiting for the bus!"

She drank some sherry, hiccupped on it, and hastily put down the glass. "I started to queue up behind them, but found I daren't get on the bus, I was laughing so much. So I walked home."

The young man's orange eyes burnt with merriment. His body relaxed in the hard kitchen chair and he grinned at her in a mixture of surprise and recognition.

"'Nebuchadnezzar, the King of the Jews . . .'" he said softly.

"Nebuchadnezzar?"

"Yes, you know: '. . . Sold his wife for a pair of shoes.'"

"Oh yes!" she said. "Oh yes . . ."

He leaned back in the chair with his sherry and a scraggy home-made cigarette, stretching out his legs under the table.

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"I was amused today, too. You'd like this." He grinned. "There was a car in the university carpark fitted with one of those burglar locks. There was a sticker on the windscreen which announced in big black letters: THIS CAR IS ALARMED."

They both laughed, not separately, but each with the other. Then there was a short period of relaxed silence. Diane felt an extraordinary sensation of freedom, of something uncurling within her mind, something which had perhaps been repressed for years. She got up and fished around in the cupboard for some shortbread.

"Hungry?" she asked, knowing that the eternal student answer would be yes.

"Always!" he replied. They laughed again.

Jarringly, the bell rang; the old-fashioned metal fixture on the kitchen wall quivering under the electric impact of hammer hitting cup.

"Look, it's alarmed!" said Diane, oddly reluctant to rush to the door to let her husband in. The student smiled, but warily now. She noticed this, and hurried out.

Nigel was duly greeted, accepting a wifely kiss, hanging up coat and umbrella and rubbing his eyes.

"Some young fool in my class," he said, "when we were busy attacking the logic of the statement *It's all in the mind* and I'd said it depends on what you understand by *it* and by *mind,* he stood up, this idiot, and called out, 'But we *do* know what mind means, sir: we must know; of course we know: *you* must know—and I don't see how you can talk like that.'"

Nigel took out his pipe and started to stuff it untidily with tobacco. It refused to light.

"Oh, it's useless trying to teach sense to such people. Their intellects are all muffled up with emotion and rubbish. They'll never see clearly in a month of Sundays."

Diane gave him a small, strained smile.

"There's a student waiting to see you, darling," she said quickly. "He appears to have brought an essay along. I gave him some sherry and shortbread."

"Oh, damn. I suppose I'll have to see him. Tell him to come to my study." And he vanished, puffing at his pipe, frowning a little, and closing the door with a bang.

Diane stared at the door-handle, then collected herself and went kitchen-wards. She sent the student in with his essay, and busied herself with the laundry basket. Then she tidied up the kitchen and sat down to wait.

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Soon Nigel came through. He walked straight to the wine cupboard and poured himself a whisky. She restrained herself from bursting out with her story until he had settled himself in a chair. She had long since learned to repress the desire to touch his cheek or his hand in passing—he was usually busy thinking, not to be disturbed; so it was only when he was obviously sitting resting that she felt free to unburden herself.

"Darling, d'you want to hear what happened to me in London Road today?" she began.

"Mmmm, what?"

"I was going towards the bus stop, the one outside Marshall's, when I suddenly noticed the most hilarious thing; the bus stop was deserted except for an old pair of shoes which were standing, side by side, waiting for the bus!"

Nigel puffed at his pipe. "You can't use the word 'waiting' in this context, dear," he said. "You, of all people, should know. There is the implication of human purpose there, so that to apply it to inanimate objects is to be guilty of the logical fault of anthropomorphism."

But his wife seemed hardly to be listening. A disinterested observer might have said that she looked as though, at any moment, she might leap up and bang her head against the wall, screaming, screaming . . .

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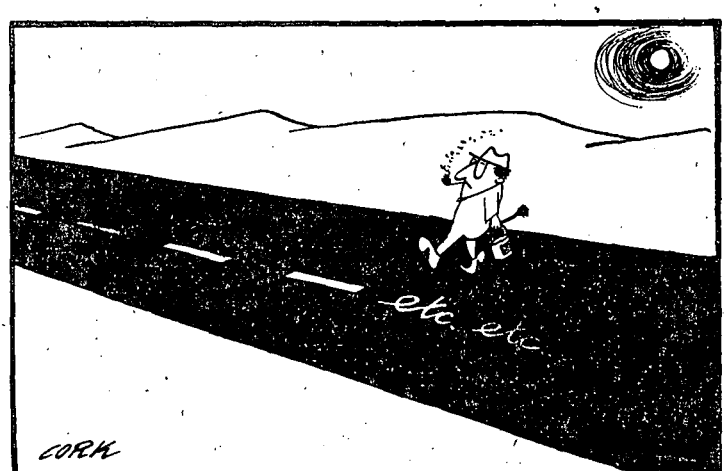

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The once docile pup was now a fierce fighting dog

NORTH OF TENNANT CREEK

BY W. S. HART

THE diesel transport, as it sped on its long and monotonous trip north, cut through a strange and alluring scent. Its frequency was outside the odour-frequency recognised by man; but to the pup, riding as guardian dog on the trailer, it was enough to drive him mad.

No-one ever thought of giving him a name, and so to all he just remained "Pup." Actually, he was a yearling Alsatian dog who had lived on that transport trailer all his life, seeing the bitumen Stuart Highway as a never-ending ribbon for ever unwinding behind him. He was accustomed to the tray of the trailer being his home, his stationary fixture; the trees, the road and any object beside the road as things that moved past.

The transport driver, his mind on the road, was unconscious of the pup leaping blindly into space and hitting the road with a *whoomp*. The road was hemmed in by low pindan scrub, interspersed with tall box and gum trees. The mirage danced ahead as it had done all that day, and for the two previous days they had been travelling. The diesel roared on towards the mirage; and the dog was left alone.

His soft, overfat woolly body saved him from feeling most of the fall, but his nose and face smashed against the bitumen, and the noise almost deafened him. Stars splashed through his brain, the hard surface of the road tore a piece of skin

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from his chin and ripped the front stoppers from his legs as he instinctively extended them. The impetus of the truck, while it remained with him, rolled him over and over and backwards, and to him the world changed into an unending whirl of pieces of tree with glimpses of his tail.

When the motion had finished playing tricks with him, it rolled him, a discarded bundle of dog, into the dust at the side of the road. He was terribly stiff and would be stiff for some days, if he lasted that long. When he landed on the bitumen he was seven hundred miles or so north on the Stuart Highway, where it is always summer and could almost be considered the land of nowhere. The road runs in a straight line from Alice Springs to Darwin, a thousand miles.

He lay now, dazed and muddled, a thin trickle of blood coming out of his cut chin and a line of red meat ants bearing down on him. The road he had always thought of as whirling past, had stopped, and the truck which he had considered fixed, had whirled away.

He had always been thought a one-man dog. He had grown from a woolly puppy to a handsome beast, fawn with black saddle and ears. The only time he saw other dogs was at short stops; they were mostly the kind that snarled around the outfit and urinated on the wheels. From his elevated position on the trailer, Pup would roar his disapproval.

"He looks all right, but what a hell of a life for a dog," a young police constable had once remarked at Tennant Creek.

Jack Wilson, Pup's owner, had replied quickly, "What the hell's wrong with his life I'd like to know?"

The constable was off duty and having a few drinks with the boys.

"I'll take odds," said Jack, "he looks better than any of the bags of fleas that are scratching themselves round the street here."

The young constable was willing to concede the point. "Go on, Jack, looks aren't everything. Can he look after himself among other dogs? He must have other dogs for company as men must have other men for company. Has he ever buried a bone? Has he ever had a fight?"

Wilson laughed. "Feed 'em well and they're happy. This pup is happier than these half-dingo-looking curs and a lot more intelligent, too."

The bar was becoming interested. "Hold hard, Jack," one of the beer-drinkers chipped in. "Jack slings off at these poor bags of fleas, half-dog, half-dingo, but which has the most

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brains? The dog or the dingo? I was chief scalper once along the Roper River. I reckon I know a bit about dingoes. I reckoned they knew as much about me, and often they were one thought ahead. Do you reckon that pup, big and brawny as he is, would last a month if he got loose up north, and if he did, would he mate and breed with the dingoes?"

"Not-flamin'-well-likely." This came from a second interjector. "He'd starve to death or else the dingoes would kill him."

"You can't beat the old dingo." The ex-scalper grew nostalgic. "He can live off the country just as the abo can." He sipped his beer. "Where you and I would starve he and the abo both laugh at us."

The constable was interested. "If Jack's Alsatian got loose up there and mated with the dingoes, would it mean bigger and better dingoes?"

"Cripes!" the ex-scalper exclaimed. "You don't want them any bigger, and they can't be any better. You chaps seem to forget a dingo has to be a dingo to survive."

"You don't chain him to the side of the trailer when you are travelling, do you, Jack?" It was an official question the constable was required to ask of motorists as they passed through the town.

"Oh, hell, no!" Wilson was ready with his reply. "I'd not like to drag the poor old pup to death if he fell off. I make sure that he's chained at night when we're camped."

That had been just a month before Pup jumped blindly off the transport as it was doing forty-five miles an hour; when his world altered, when he found it was the transport that was moving, not the road and the trees.

He was like a man waking from a dream. Then the meaning of the scent that had wakened his sex urge suddenly came to him, and he perked up with understanding. The column of meat ants had reached the wound in his chin, and he impatiently brushed it off. The alluring scent not only seemed to be getting stronger, but it seemed to be everywhere. He gave a few doubting whines of wonder, then, as if from nowhere, a little yellow dingo bitch squirmed up to him; she wriggled around and then she stood nose to nose with him as if to get better acquainted. She began to lick his wounded chin. Then, keeping just ahead of him, she led him through the low pindan scrub for half a mile. The pup's sense of direction had gone with his whirling fall and he blindly limped

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behind her in an ecstasy of delight. He never quite caught up, the little bitch saw to that. Even in the dingo world, love-making had to be carried out in a manner decreed by custom. She led him on till they came to a small swamp and they both lay down in this, their noses touching after quenching their thirst.

The pup was willing to do without the preliminary courting, but not the bitch. She playfully dodged his clumsy rushes, then she widened the circle as if she was teaching him a game. Her scent filled the air and was wafted to every dingo for half a mile; and nature's radar gave the direction exactly to a degree. Half a dozen dogs began racing towards the courting couple, and each knew to almost a second how much time he had before it was too late.

A big blue-and-white dog dingo was the first to arrive. He had torn through the scrub like a cyclone, overwhelmed with determination, his horrible wall eyes hard and cruel. He shot out of the bush, and his hard right shoulder hit the pup slap in the ribs on the left side. It was an opening, fighting blow known to both dog and man, right over the heart. A yelp of pain went out from the pup as his ribs crushed inwards, and even before he hit the ground, the dingo was on top of him, ripping, tearing, feeling for his throat.

Then five other dogs burst in and a real fight commenced, a blinding, roaring fight, each dog for himself and an open go for all. The dogs fought in circles and in groups, then, when it seemed they must be exhausted, the fight stopped. At one moment the air had been made hideous with their roars of hate; at the next, silence. Perhaps the little yellow bitch may have been acting as referee. The big blue dingo had definitely won her favour. The others accepted without question, and sent thin wails of disappointment into the air.

The pup probably had a thousand minor scratches and bruises from the scraping, gripping toes of the fighting dingoes, as each executed his own type of footwork. His sole desire was to leave the scene as one of the dingoes chased him ignominiously into the scrub.

Perhaps if he had mixed with other dogs he might have fared better. Weary, aching, and looking over his shoulder for fear his aggressors were following him, he loped away. Night came, and then morning; hunger and thirst governed him. Previously, he would have been given a couple of pounds of raw red meat before going to bed, and have a shin-bone of beef to gnaw during the night. Now he didn't even

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know how to hunt for a feed. As he wandered, sometimes whimpering in his misery, he broke out of the scrub and found himself back on the Stuart Highway.

A Pioneer bus swished past, loaded with tourists. Its rush frightened him, and he ducked back into the bush. He tried again, and a huge semi-trailer nearly ran him down. Here was civilisation, the only life he knew; but he did not know how to handle it. As the morning wore on, his thirst became dangerous; his nose became dry and cracked, his coat was harsh and dry. A dog cannot live for long without water in a hot climate. His sense of smell had practically deserted him, for his nose had swollen from a slash he had received in the *mêlée*. At last the faint smell of water came to him.

When he found it, there was but a tiny trickle that emptied itself into a small pool. He dropped on his belly while he drank and drank. He brought up all the stale gastric juices that had been clamouring for food, and felt better. He drank and rolled in the swamp until he had washed the dried blood from his hide, leaving the ants and flies nothing to feed on. Then after squirming and rolling on some dried reeds, he went in search of food.

It was his lucky day. The Pioneer bus had stopped not long after passing him and had gone on its way leaving the usual debris. Broken sandwiches and pieces of cake were not very satisfying fare, but to a starving dog they gave some respite. Another transport swished past. This he recognised as being his old home on wheels, and he raced after it until the heat of the bitumen forced him into the scrub to ease his burning feet.

He found another trickle of water across the road and he lay in this and drank again, until his empty belly began to rumble. Then he began to wander wearily along the highway. His luck was in this time, and he had a veritable windfall. A speeding truck had, the night before, hit a kangaroo and tossed the body into the scrub at the side of the road as it whirled on its way. From this the pup ate until his belly was fully extended, then weariness overcame him and he slept.

It was dark when he awoke, to the snarling and gnawing of dogs as they wrangled over the kangaroo. Strength had returned to him and, in the urgency of the moment, he was among the intruders. Their hasty withdrawal gave him courage. His visitors were a young dingo dog and two bitches. They had just come through a very lean period, the drought having caught them in bad country. The dingo dog was

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inclined to argument, though the pup was a good four inches taller than he was; but after exchanging a few snarls with nothing really settled, they all moved in to feed together.

It took them a couple of days to finish the kangaroo, then hunger took charge. The pup automatically joined the pack, and the hunt was on again. The dingoes were tireless in their hunting and the more they hunted, the hungrier they became. The pup took the hardship very badly for he was still sore from the punishment he had received in the fight; also, there was an under-current of ill-feeling between him and the dingo dog. The pup wanted to lead. The dingo felt differently. His idea was to lead with a bitch on either side of him just a hundred yards away; then, born hunters that they were, they would miss nothing that walked or crawled.

The pup was not a hunting dog by instinct, but he was learning fast. Even in the short time he had been with the dingoes his appearance had changed. He was now more like a gaunt, hungry wolf than a big, upstanding Alsatian. His muscles had tightened and his loins seemed to have dropped. He was carrying his tail lower but with a curl up at the end, as if he was ready to spring. He looked firm and aggressive.

He had one habit completely contrary to that of the dingoes. While they were always bustling and inquisitive, he would, at times, stand immobile as if thinking. He may have seen in retrospect his old life as one of full and plenty which he had thrown away for nothing, or compared it with his present life in which he lived like a dog with other dogs for constant companions.

He had lost many pounds in weight, useless pounds; his temper was inclined to be brittle, although on occasion he would play and frolic with the bitches. Then the companionship would be complete; but as a hunter he was a disappointment. When they were hunting through tall grass, the dingoes would disappear leaving the pup alone and nonplussed. The grass had grown to a height of four or five feet, cane-like and very dense. It was not the instinct of the pup to hunt by scent as the dingoes did. He hunted by sight, and quickly developed the habit when he could not see his companions, of running and jumping above the grass when he could not locate them. This, to the dingoes, was definitely not a good idea.

When the dingoes mysteriously disappeared, they were hunting game back towards him so that he could make the kill and avoid exhausting hard runs. Once, when the pup was fruitlessly jumping up and down, he almost collided with a big

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kangaroo doe that was hastily coming his way. It was hard to tell which got the greater fright. The pup let out a frightened "Whoof!" which turned the doe back on her tracks, fortunately right in the path of one of the bitches. The bitch grabbed the doe, and was doing her best to hold it when the Alsatian gathered his wits together and quickly made the kill.

The Alsatian probably represented a few hundred years of selective breeding, while the dingoes had been developed over perhaps a million years, when many dingoes had died while their instincts were being perfected. They could get along with one good feed every four days, but two days would find the pup weak and trembling. It was then that he would try to strike out on his own and lead the pack. This would annoy the dingo dog and he would bustle ahead and try to shoulder the pup to one side. The nerves of both would be frayed; they would be testy and empty, and there was always a snarling tussle in which the pup would more than hold his own. He had superior intelligence and physique; though at this time he got in a jam which nearly cost him his life.

The little pack had been wandering hungry for a day; they had come through a valley of tall grass without even getting a smell of game. Then they broke into lightly-timbered country where they found a mob of wild donkeys quietly sleeping in the shade. In a space away from them was a little donkey mare which had just dropped her foal. The foal was a poor, tottering little thing wobbling at its mother's side. On seeing it, the Alsatian let out a bark of conquest; the foal represented a meal and he grabbed it.

The pup had probably never seen a donkey before; certainly he had never seen a donkey mare protecting her foal. Just how many hooves that little mare had he was never to know. It seemed like hundreds as they came at him from all directions. Nimble as the pup was, he was caught in the ribs by the mad tattoo. He stood back and barked his annoyance and then found the fight was not over, for an old jack donkey bore down on him like a lumbering avalanche, his yellow, long teeth bared. He grabbed at the pup across the loins and with the help of other donkeys, the old jack donkey soon chased the pup away.

After such a showing the atmosphere between the pup and the dingoes was tense. While the pup had failed to get the donkey foal, the dingoes had captured a joey wallaby which they resented having to share.

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But the pup was too hungry to be bluffed. He leapt straight at the dingo dog who met the pup face to face. They went down together, and it was then the pup realised he had more to learn of fighting, for the dingo grabbed his front foot and gave it a hard crunch between his molars. When the pup pulled back at the awful spasm of pain, the dingo downed him and would have shaken him by the throat, but he managed to pull free and in an instant was on the dingo's back, shaking him by the scruff of the neck, his strong white teeth meeting through the tough skin. The dingo's eyes were glazed but he managed to shake the pup off. The fight, however, had gone out of him. He met the pup's rush with a defensive roar but did not try to continue the fight. From then on the pup was boss. He took the pack for his own.

Some weeks later, when his paw was healed, he was challenged again; this time by a big white dingo as tall as himself. Drought had driven the dingo across from the Gulf country, and he had had many fights on the way. When they met, the pup had enjoyed several days of good feeding and hard running. Not only did he have enough stamina to wear the white dingo down, but to chase him away, slashing him painfully across the shoulders as he did so.

Actually the little pack was doing exceptionally well under his leadership. Perhaps, with time, they could have thriven and multiplied, becoming a strain apart. The bitches had missed mating the previous year because of the severity of the season, when it was as much as they could do to keep alive.

Mating time was approaching. Restlessness was developing in the Alsatian.

It was after they had been hunting through this land of plenty for some weeks that they lost the dog dingo. One day when he wandered off, he caught the sex scent. His nose gave him the direction; his eyes became bright and his ears pricked. He was off. To hesitate meant failure. The sound of another dingo tearing through the scrub came to him. They converged, and as they came shoulder to shoulder, they snapped and snarled as they ran. Four dogs were in the *mêlée* this time and it followed the same pattern which had introduced the dog to dingo courtship. A big, saggy brown bitch, mother of many previous litters, calmly and serenely surveyed the fighting dogs; and then when she thought they had gone far enough, the accolade was given to the pup's former companion. He would be too busy to return to the little pack again.

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Jack Wilson continued to think of his lost dog as Pup, but he was now a fierce fighting dog, reverted to the grey wolf-type, a killer.

His first real killing instinct came out when he met the blue dingo dog who was hunting a short distance away, accompanied by a bitch and a half-grown litter of pups. Perhaps the Alsatian recognised him. They met, and while the dingo may have been the more experienced fighter, for rugged aggression he could not match the Alsatian. The dingo actually bounced off as he met the Alsatian chest to chest. To the dingo, the huge head of the Alsatian was like a battering ram full of slashing teeth. He was grabbed hard by the jaw and thrown to the ground. It was then that the dingo should have called enough. Instead, he bounced in again to be ruthlessly grabbed by the throat and throttled.

Previously the pup had killed for food. This time, he killed one of his kind fiercely and unnecessarily, in a fight that should not have ended in death.

It was a little party of aborigines which brought news of the pup's survival and that he was running with two dingo bitches. The aborigines had been on a walk-about from Elsey Station and had come across the tracks. Even though they hadn't seen the pup, they were able to describe him in detail even to his colour, and they demonstrated his peculiar style of walking. They had come across the blue dingo he had killed. This placed an aura of danger around him. They told of his having killed an old man kangaroo unaided.

News of the aborigines' finding soon reached Tennant Creek.

"So that is where Pup has got to!" Jack Wilson was pleased and inclined to be boastful. The ex-dingo scalper remained sceptical. He considered the hazards of the north too many for the unwary.

"A round for Pup!" Wilson was so pleased that he shouted for all in the bar.

"Well, anyway," said the young constable, "at least he's been living a dog's life."

Jack Wilson was just getting under way with his big transport, when, two hundred miles north of Tennant Creek, the Alsatian woke to a lovely tropical morning. He stretched himself. He walked across to where the bigger of the two bitches was also stretching herself. He edged her along with his chin. Nature's chemistry was working in her, when she must seek him. But the dingo type of courtship was not for

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the pup, and he knew he could toss any intruder from the ring.

In his persistence, he kept on trying to push the bitch towards a clump of wattles. She, in turn, was determined on edging him away. At last the Alsatian became annoyed. He snarled, dodging around her.

The bitch had tried to give him a lesson and failed. It was the north that taught him with one of those hazards which, the ex-dingo scalper had hinted, were too much for any tame dog. And it was a final lesson.

The taipan, angry at the intrusion on its domain, struck. It shot a full three feet from where it was coiled, and hit the pup hard on the shoulder.

The bitch did not wait. As the pup's eyes glazed over, she trotted off into the timber.

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Symptom Recital

BY DOROTHY PARKER

I do not like my state of mind;
I'm bitter, querulous, unkind.
I hate my legs, I hate my hands,
I do not yearn for lovelier lands.
I dread the dawn's recurrent light;
I hate to go to bed at night.
I snoot at simple, earnest folk.
I cannot take the gentlest joke.
I find no peace in paint or type.
My world is but a lot of tripe.
I'm disillusioned, empty-breasted.
For what I think, I'd be arrested.
I am not sick, I am not well.
My quondam dreams are shot to hell.
My soul is crushed, my spirit sore;
I do not like me any more.
I cavil, quarrel, grumble, grouse.
I ponder on the narrow house.
I shudder at the thought of men . . .
I'm due to fall in love again.

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H. G. Wells

A CENTENARY STORY

THIS YEAR marks the centenary of the birth of H. G. Wells. Born in Bromley, Kent, on September 21st, 1866, he was the son of a shopkeeper. The boy who grew up to be a draper's apprentice and then a schoolteacher, developed into one of the foremost writers and men of ideas of his age.

As a novelist, he showed a Dickensian warmth and observation in such books as Kipps, The History of Mr. Polly and Love and Mr. Lewisham. A prophetic pioneer of science fiction, he produced such remarkable leaps of the imagination as The Time Machine, The Invisible Man, The War of the Worlds, The First Men in the Moon. Wells died in August, 1946.

At the height of his success, a new magazine had been launched—Argosy. For its second issue in July, 1926, Wells wrote a typical example of his skill as an entertaining story-teller, rather than a prophet. It is that story which we now reprint in his centenary year.

Please turn the page ▶

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THE LOST INHERITANCE

by H. G. WELLS

"MY uncle," said the man with the glass eye, "was what you might call a hemi-semi-demi-millionaire. He was worth about a hundred and twenty thousand. Quite. And he left me all his money."

I glanced at the shiny sleeve of his coat, and my eye travelled up to the frayed collar.

"Every penny," said the man with the glass eye, and I caught the active pupil looking at me with a touch of offence.

"I've never had any windfalls like that," I said, trying to speak enviously and propitiate him.

"Even a legacy isn't always a blessing," he remarked with a sigh, and with an air of philosophical resignation he put the red nose and the wiry moustache into his tankard for a space.

"Perhaps not," I said.

"He was an author, you see, and he wrote a lot of books."

"Indeed!"

"That was the trouble of it all." He stared at me with the available eye to see if I grasped his statement, then averted his face a little and produced a toothpick.

"You see," he said, smacking his lips after a pause, "it was like this. He was my uncle—my maternal uncle. And he had —what shall I call it?—a weakness for writing edifying literature. Weakness is hardly the word—downright mania is nearer the mark. He'd been librarian in a Polytechnic, and as soon as the money came to him he began to indulge his ambition. It's a simply extraordinary and incomprehensible thing to me. Here was a man of thirty-seven suddenly dropped into a perfect pile of gold, and he didn't go—not a day's bust on it. One would think a chap would go and get himself dressed a bit decent—say a couple of dozen pairs of trousers at a West End tailor's; but he never did. You'd hardly believe it, but when he died he hadn't even a gold watch. It seems wrong for people like that to have money.

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"All he did was just to take a house, and order in pretty nearly five tons of books and ink and paper, and set to writing edifying literature as hard as ever he could write.. I *can't* understand it! But he did. The money came to him, curiously enough, through a maternal uncle of *his*, unexpected like, when he was seven-and-thirty. My mother, it happened, was his only relation in the wide, wide world, except some second cousins of his. And I was her only son. You follow all that? The second cousins had only one son, too, but they brought him to see the old man too soon. He was rather a spoilt youngster, was this son of theirs, and directly he set eyes on my uncle, he began bawling out as hard as he could. 'Take 'im away—er,' he says, 'take 'im away,' and so did for himself entirely. It was pretty straight sailing, you'd think, for me, eh? And my mother, being a sensible, careful woman, settled the business in her own mind long before he did.

"He was a curious little chap, was my uncle, as I remember him. I don't wonder at the kid being scared. Hair, just like these Japanese dolls they sell, black and straight and stiff all round the brim, and none in the middle, and below, a whitish kind of face and rather large, dark grey eyes moving about behind his spectacles. He used to attach a great deal of importance to dress, and always wore a flapping overcoat and a big-brimmed felt hat of a most extraordinary size. He looked a rummy little beggar, I can tell you. Indoors it was, as a rule, a dirty red flannel dressing-gown and a black skull-cap he had. That black skull-cap made him look like the portraits of all kinds of celebrated people.

"He was always moving about from house to house, was my uncle, with his chair which had belonged to Savage Landor, and his two writing-tables, one of Carlyle's and the other of Shelley's, so the dealer told him, and the completest portable reference library in England, he said he had—and he lugged the whole caravan, now to a house at Downe, near Darwin's old place, then to Reigate, near Meredith, then off to Haslemere, then back to Chelsea for a bit, and then up to Hampstead. He knew there was something wrong with his stuff, but he never knew there was anything wrong with his brains. It was always the air, or the water, or the altitude, or some tommy-rot like that. 'So much depends on environment,' he used to say, and stare at you hard, as if he half suspected you were hiding a grin at him somewhere under your face. 'So much depends on environment to a sensitive mind like mine.'

"What was his name? You wouldn't know it if I told you.

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He wrote nothing that anyone has ever read—nothing. No-one *could* read it. He wanted to be a great teacher, he said, and he didn't know what he wanted to teach any more than a child. So he just blethered at large about Truth and Righteousness, and the Spirit of History, and all that. Book after book he wrote and published at his own expense. He wasn't quite right in his head, you know, really; and to hear him go on at the critics—not because they slated him, mind you—he liked that—but because they didn't take any notice of him at all.

"'What do the nations want?' he would ask, holding out his brown old claw. 'Why, teaching—guidance! They are scattered upon the hills like sheep without a shepherd. There is War and Rumours of War, the unlaid Spirit of Discord abroad in the land, Nihilism, Vivisection, Vaccination, Drunkenness, Penury, Want, Socialistic Error, Selfish Capital! Do you see the clouds, Ted?'—my name, you know—'Do you see the clouds lowering over the land? and behind it all—the Mongol waits!' He was always very great on Mongols and the Spectre of Socialism, and such-like things.

"Then out would come his finger at me, and with his eyes all afire and his skull-cap askew, he would whisper: 'And here am I. What do I want? Nations to teach. Nations! I say it with all modesty, Ted, I *could,* I would guide them; nay! but I *will* guide them to a safe haven, to the land of Righteousness flowing with milk and honey.'

"That's how he used to go on. Ramble, rave about the nations, and righteousness, and that kind of thing. Kind of mincemeat of Bible and blethers. From fourteen up to three-and-twenty, when I might have been improving my mind, my mother used to wash me and brush my hair (at least in the earlier years of it), with a nice parting down the middle, and take me, once or twice a week, to hear this old lunatic jabber about things he had read of in the morning papers, trying to do it as much like Carlyle as he could, and I used to sit according to instructions, and look intelligent and nice, and pretend to be taking it all in.

"Afterwards I used to go of my own free will, out of a regard for the legacy. I was the only person that used to go and see him. He wrote, I believe, to every man who made the slightest stir in the world, sending him a copy or so of his books, and inviting him to come and talk about the nations to him; but half of them didn't answer, and none ever came. And when the girl let you in—she was an artful bit of goods, that girl—there were heaps of letters on the hall-seat waiting to go

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off, addressed to Prince Bismarck, the President of the United States, and such-like people. And one went up the staircase and along the cobwebby passage—the housekeeper drank like fury, and his passages were always cobwebby—and found him at last, with books turned down all over the room, and heaps of torn paper on the floor, and telegrams and newspapers littered about, and empty coffee-cups and half-eaten bits of toast on the desk and mantel. You'd see his back humped up, and his hair would be sticking out quite straight between the collar of that dressing-gown thing and the edge of the skull-cap.

"'A moment!' he would say. 'A moment!' over his shoulder. 'The *mot juste*, you know, Ted, *le mot juste*. Righteous thought righteously expressed—Aah!—concatenation. And now Ted,' he'd say, spinning round in his study chair, 'how's Young England?' That was his silly name for me.

"Well, that was my uncle, and that was how he talked—to me, at any rate. With others about he seemed a bit shy. And he not only talked to me, but he gave me his books, books of six hundred pages or so, with cock-eyed headings, *The Shrieking Sisterhood, The Behemoth of Bigotry, Crucibles and Cullenders,* and so on. All very strong, and none of them original. The very last time but one that I saw him he gave me a book. He was feeling ill even then, and his hand shook and he was despondent. I noticed it because I was naturally on the lookout for those little symptoms. 'My last book, Ted,' he said. 'My last book, my boy; my last word to the deaf and hardened nations'; and I'm hanged if a tear didn't go rolling down his yellow old cheek. He was regular crying because it was so nearly over, and he hadn't only written about fifty-three books of rubbish. 'I've sometimes thought, Ted—' he said, and stopped.

"'Perhaps I've been a bit hasty and angry with this stiff-necked generation. A little more sweetness, perhaps, and a little less blinding light. I've sometimes thought—I might have swayed them. But I've done my best, Ted.'

"And then, with a burst, for the first and last time in his life, he owned himself a failure. It showed he was really ill. He seemed to think for a minute, and then he spoke quietly and low, as sane and sober as I am now. 'I've been a fool, Ted,' he said. 'I've been flapping nonsense all my life. Only He who readeth the heart knows whether this is anything more than vanity, Ted, I don't. But He knows, He knows, and if I have done foolishly and vainly, in my heart—in my heart—'

"Just like that he spoke, repeating himself, and he stopped

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quite short and handed the book to me, trembling. Then the old shine came back into his eye. I remember it all fairly well, because I repeated it and acted it to my old mother when I got home, to cheer her up a bit. 'Take this book and read it,' he said. 'It's my last word, my very last word. I've left all my property to you, Ted, and may you use it better than I have done.' And then he fell a-coughing.

"I remember that quite well even now, and how I went home cock-a-hoop, and how he was in bed the next time I called. The housekeeper was downstairs, drunk, and I fooled about—as a young man will—with the girl in the passage before I went to him. He was sinking fast. But even then his vanity clung to him.

"'Have you read it?' he whispered.

"'Sat up all night reading it,' I said in his ear to cheer him. 'It's the last,' said I, and then, with a memory of some poetry or other in my head, 'but it's the bravest and best.'

"He smiled a little and tried to squeeze my hand as a woman might do, and left off squeezing in the middle, and lay still. 'The bravest and the best,' said I again, seeing it pleased him. But he didn't answer. I heard the girl giggle outside the door, for occasionally we'd had just a bit of innocent laughter, you know, at his ways. I looked at his face, and his eyes were closed, and it was just as if somebody had punched in his nose on either side. But he was still smiling. It's queer to think of—he lay dead, lay dead there, an utter failure, with the smile of success on his face.

"That was the end of my uncle. You can imagine me and my mother saw that he had a decent funeral. Then, of course, came the hunt for the will. We began decent and respectful at first, and before the day was out we were ripping chairs and smashing bureau panels, and sounding walls. Every hour we expected those others to come in. We asked the housekeeper and found she'd actually witnessed a will—on an ordinary half-sheet of notepaper it was written, and very short, she said—not a month ago. The other witness was the gardener, and he bore her out word for word. But I'm hanged if there was that or any other will to be found. The way my mother talked must have made him turn in his grave. At last a lawyer at Reigate sprang one on us that had been made years ago during some temporary quarrel with my mother. I'm blessed if that wasn't the only will to be discovered anywhere, and it left every penny he possessed to that 'Take 'im away' youngster

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of his second cousins'—a chap who'd never had to stand his talking not for one afternoon of his life."

The man with the glass eye stopped.

"I thought you said—" I began.

"Half a minute," said the man with the glass eye. "*I* had to wait for the end of the story till this very morning, and I was a blessed sight more interested than you are. You just wait a bit, too. They executed the will, and the other chap inherited, and directly he was one-and-twenty he began to blue it. How he did blue it, to be sure! He bet, he drank, he got in the papers for this and that. I tell you, it makes me wriggle to think of the times he had. He blued every ha'penny of it before he was thirty, and the last I heard of him was—Holloway! Three years ago.

"Well, I naturally fell on hard times, because, as you see, the only trade I knew was legacy-cadging. All my plans were waiting over to begin, so to speak, when the old chap died. I've had my ups and downs since then. Just now it's a period of depression. I tell you frankly, I'm on the look-out for help. I was hunting round my room to find something to raise a bit on for immediate necessities, and the sight of all those presentation volumes—no-one will buy them, not to wrap butter in, even—well, they annoyed me. I'd promised him not to part with them, and I never kept a promise easier. I let out at them with my boot, and sent them shooting across the room. One lifted at the kick, and spun through the air. And out of it flapped—you guess? It was the will. He'd given it me himself in that very last volume of all."

He folded his arms on the table, and looked sadly with the active eye at his empty tankard. He shook his head slowly, and said softly, "I'd never *opened* the book, much more cut a page!" Then he looked up, with a bitter laugh, for my sympathy. "Fancy hiding it there! Eh? Of all places."

He began to fish absently for a dead fly with his finger. "It just shows you the vanity of authors," he said, looking up at me. "It wasn't no trick of his. He'd meant perfectly fair. He'd really thought I was really going home to read that blessed book of his through. But it shows you, don't it?"—his eye went down to the tankard again—"It shows you, too, how we poor human beings fail to understand one another."

But there was no misunderstanding the eloquent thirst of his eye. He accepted with ill-feigned surprise. He said, in the usual, subtle formula, that he didn't mind if he did.

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TASTY

What ho, Mrs. Brisket,
Why not take a plunge and risk it? . . .
If, for a lark,
Some saucy old shark
Takes a nibble at your chocolate biscuit,
Swim for the shore
And the crowd will roar,
What ho, Mrs. Brisket!

NOËL COWARD,
The Girl Who Came to Supper

AN INNOCENT AT SEA

IN the early days at Tarawa, I did want just one tababa all my own. I could not get the brutes to take any kind of trolled bait or cast lure, so I had to fall back on the villagers' technique with a one-man canoe—my cook-boy immediately doubled up with laughter when I announced my intention.

I was wafted on to the canoe and pushed off in a silence that throbbed with joyous expectation. I dropped the baited hook, made the line fast and, following instructions, set the canoe drifting . . .

I was not yet settled back in my seat when the canoe took a shuddering leap backwards and my nose hit the foredeck. A roar went up from the crowd as I was drawn whizzing away from it on my face. I picked myself up with much care and was in the act of sitting again when the shark reversed direction. The back of my head cracked down on the deck behind me; my legs flew up; my high-riding bottom was presented to the sightseers, shooting at incredible speed towards them. In the next fifteen minutes, without one generous pause, that shark contrived to jerk, twist or bounce from my body for public exhibition every ignoble attitude of which a gangling frame, lost to all self-respect in a wild scrabble for handholds, is capable

ARTHUR GRIMBLE, *A Pattern of Islands*

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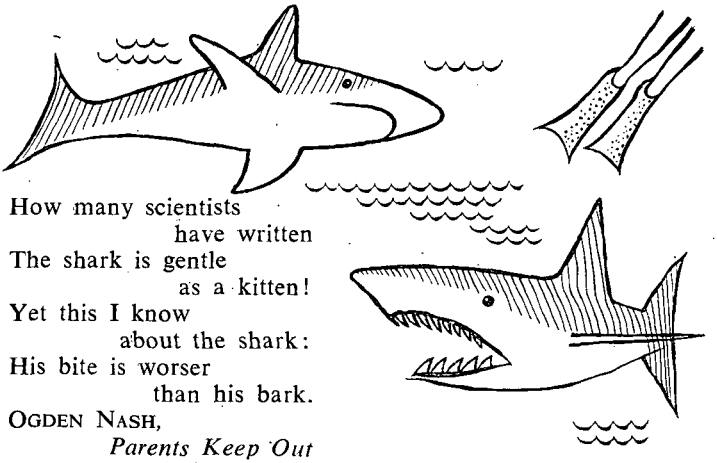
MORTALS

IN a depth of fifteen feet we sighted an eight-foot shark of a species we had never before seen. He was impressively neat, light-grey, sleek. I became the film director, making signs to Dumas, who was co-starred with the shark. Dumas obligingly swam in front of the beast and along behind it . . .

The shark had gradually led us down to sixty feet. Dumas pointed down. From the visibility limit of the abyss, two more sharks climbed towards us; the grey shark was getting closer to us, reducing the circuit in which he slowly revolved . . . Dumas and I ransacked our memories for advice on how to frighten off sharks. "Gesticulate wildly," said a lifeguard. We flailed our arms. The grey did not falter. "Give 'em a flood of bubbles," said a helmet diver. Dumas waited until the shark had reached his nearest point and released a heavy exhalation. The shark did not react. "Shout as loud as you can," said Hans Hass. We hooted until our voices cracked. The shark appeared deaf—his cold, tranquil eye appraised us. He seemed to know what he wanted, and he was in no hurry.

JACQUES-YVES COUSTEAU, *The Silent World*



How many scientists
have written
The shark is gentle
as a kitten!
Yet this I know
about the shark:
His bite is worser
than his bark.

OGDEN NASH,
Parents Keep Out

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BY DON STANFORD

BOY

IN the final days of October, the boy Eugenio brought his flock down to the Home Ranch, where the rams waited to cover the ewes. He had lost four sheep out of fifteen hundred, all to a mountain lion which had found the flock and followed it for a week, early in June, soon after he had taken the sheep up to the High Country.

The lion had also killed one of his two dogs, but the boy had finally got close enough to kill the lion with his carbine, and with the remaining dog he had kept the flock safe for nearly five months in the vast loneliness of the High Sierras, walking from twenty to thirty miles a day, pitching his tent and cooking his solitary supper at night after the sheep were settled, getting up at first chill light to break camp and pack his *burro* and move with the grazing sheep until sundown.

Once each fortnight he would locate one of the base camps, and find the cache of food and wine that had been left for him there; at the base camps he would do his laundry and bake bread, but he had not chanced upon another herder during this entire season: for five months he had not spoken, except to his dog, nor had he heard another human voice.

He could not sleep indoors, back at the Home Ranch, but this was not unusual: there were permanent ridge-poles set up well away from the ranch buildings, where the herders who had been long alone and outdoors and in silence might pitch their tents until such time as they might be able to endure confinement indoors and the sounds made by other men. For though a man be starved for the company of men, after five months in silent solitude, still, at first, the softest of voices rings deafeningly upon an ear accustomed only to the awesome silence of

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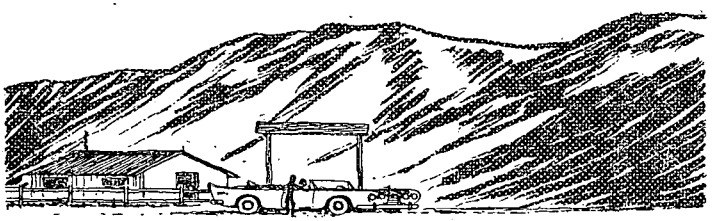
FROM THE HILLS



the High Country, and the *bla-a-a-at* of the sheep and the rare scolding challenge of the dogs who work, for the most part, in purposeful silence.

The boy slept alone in his tent by night, and did his work in shy silence by day, and ate his meals in the cookhouse at the long table with men as awkwardly silent as himself, though the strangeness was less for the others: for some of them it was the second year and for some the third and for some it was even a second contract; only for the boy Eugenio was this the first year of the three-year contract under which the Basque herders were brought from Eskual Herria, the homeland in the Pyrenees, to work for the Hallelujah Land & Livestock Company in Hallelujah Junction, Nevada. Still, when the men spoke, the language they used was Basque; though each of them could speak either French or Spanish as well, depending on which side of the home mountains he had come from, none of them save Peter Saralegui, the foreman, had learned to speak English.

Gradually, in the returning familiarity of closeness and the sound of the familiar language, the lingering effect of the long loneliness began to wear off, and the older herders began to speak among themselves more than was strictly necessary, and to joke and laugh uproariously at table and sometimes, in the evenings, to sing. Some of them struck their tents and moved into the bunk-house as the sharp cold moved down into the valley at night, but the boy Eugenio continued to sleep in his tent and to speak, shyly, only when it was necessary to do so. He laughed when the others laughed at table, but less loudly, and when there was singing he withdrew a little way and sang

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softly alone, his eyes closed and his lips moving with the song, but inaudibly.

There came a Saturday, then, when the laughter in the cook-house at mid-day was more boisterous than usual, with an undercurrent of nervousness, and suppressed excitement ran swift as white water among the hard-handed, soft-spoken men. When the work was finished, they scrubbed themselves with painful thoroughness and dressed clumsily in stiff suits that hung upon them awkwardly, and hung their heads bashfully and glanced at one another sidelong, furtively, speaking less than usual and laughing nervously at nothing, in short explosive bursts that died at once in quick agonies of self-consciousness.

Peter Saralegui, the foreman, brought the company truck round to the bunk-house and counted them as they scrambled in; he left them waiting there while he went to find the boy Eugenio, who was dressed and scrubbed like the rest, but hiding in his tent.

The boy said, with careful dignity, that he did not think he would care, after all, to go and see the sights of the American city of Reno; and Peter Saralegui squatted on his boot-heels and said gravely that that was up to the boy, of course, and unhurriedly rolled himself a cigarette and struck a kitchen match to flame upon his thumbnail and lit it.

Wreathing himself in billowing clouds of smoke from mouth and nostrils, Peter Saralegui remarked reflectively that even the ranch cook was going to town tonight, to get a change from his own cooking; there would be no supper at the ranch.

The boy said politely that he was not hungry anyway, but he had done a hard day's work and he had a boy's hearty appetite; he could not entirely keep the dismay from his eyes.

All the men were going to eat supper at the Santa Fe Hotel in Reno, Peter Saralegui said idly, smoking his cigarette and not looking directly at the boy; it was a good Basque restaurant with a long table like the cook-house here, where only good Basque food was served and only Basque spoken, and the ranch would pay for all the thick chops and chick-peas and codfish in red sauce and good Basque bread and good red wine the men could eat, and drink. But, of course, if a man was not hungry, and not interested in the lights of a strange foreign city, and perhaps too tired by the strain of his day's work to consider an uncomfortable jolting ride in the body of the truck—perhaps he would prefer to sleep, and recover his strength . . .

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With elaborate casualness the boy arose and said that perhaps he would go after all; at least it would be a change from the meals in the cook-house (although the menu Peter Saralegui had described was precisely the meal the ranch cook prepared almost every day of the week), and he could no doubt wait comfortably in the restaurant until the others returned from their sightseeing excursions, in which he had no desire to participate.

Peter Saralegui agreed, extinguishing his cigarette and rising, and together they strolled, unhurriedly, to the waiting truck.

The meal at the Santa Fe was enormous, and festive, and boisterous; the platters of good familiar Basque dishes kept coming without pause, and the great carafes of red wine passed unceasingly up and down the length of the long table, the glasses were never empty.

The boy Eugenio was used to wine—a gallon every five days, as well as his food, was part of his contract wages—but he was accustomed to drinking it from his *chahakoa,* holding the goatskin wine-bag high to spray his parched throat with a few spoonsful in a thin cooling stream. Drinking from a glass one took more, a great deal more, and even as his appetite flagged he felt suddenly uncomfortably full, and then flushed with heat, and when he arose from the table his ears buzzed with a strange giddiness. It was too hot in here, and far too noisy, he thought, and escaped unnoticed into the street, into the cold dry air of the night under the stars.

The sky and the stars he knew, and the night and the clear cold air sweeping down from the surrounding peaks. The garish lights in many winking colours, and the crowding cars and the tumultuous multitude of jostling, close-pressed people, and the roaring cacophony of unfamiliar sounds were strange —but somehow not, after a first panicky moment, frightening. The snarl of engines and the rhythmic clank of slot machines and the wild cries of unintelligible voices assailed his ears, and he filled his lungs with mountain air and stood his ground; people thrust past him, actually striking him with their bodies, and he did not flinch; a woman came warm and solid against him for a moment, passing, and left him with his nostrils filled with wondrous fragrance, and a foolish grin on his mouth and the light of revelation in his eye. For none of them *saw* him: he might have been invisible, so inconspicuous was he. He might have been invisible, on Mars. Incessantly giving tongue in this exotic language of which he understood no word, like music in an unknown tonal scale, they surged and eddied about

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him and past him, unaware of his fascinated, gaping, grinning wonder: men in well-cut suits and garish sports-jackets and duffel coats and dungarees; women in mink and sable and shabby cloth and silken legs and ridiculous trousers. In feverish excitement they rushed past, babbling and gabbling, never looking at one another, and none of them looked at the silent, uncomprehending visitor from another world, the invisible stocky powerful boy in the thick rigidly-cut suit of stout serge that had belonged to his father, a world away . . .

The wine and the hard strength of his youth coursed hot in his veins, and he moved on without fear, marvelling. Great rooms opened on to the street, without walls or doors; within the rooms people clustered close together—too close—at tables, or in serried ranks before the machines that clanked when one pulled their handles down, or at bars. Their gaiety was bewildering, but unmistakable; the noise was unceasing; the kaleidoscope of blinding colour constant and intoxicating.

He found himself, he had no idea how much later, within a room less noisy and less crowded than the rest. Here, too, there were the tables of various shapes and sizes covered in green felt; there was a distant bar and, beyond it, an orchestra playing: his soul expanded to the music. But here there were only a few people clustered at the tables, and they were less noisy and more conservatively dressed: for a moment he feared for his invisibility, but none glanced at him as he passed by, shrinking, and his confidence returned. He even paused, daringly close to a small high crescent of a table, furrowing his brow intently as the woman behind it dealt cards with magical swiftness to the girl perched alone on a high stool at one end, and to herself. With a flickering gesture the dealer flipped over one of her own cards, dropped another on it, reached and took a small clanking stack of silver dollars from the girl, swept all the cards together and riffled them—and looked straight at the boy Eugenio and smiled in unmistakable invitation, gesturing to a vacant stool.

He was not tired, but he had been walking a long time; he sat, the better to look about him. Cards flickered; one landed before him, another, face up, on top of it. He became aware that the woman dealing was looking at him, waiting; grinning blankly, he shook his head at her. *I don't understand.*

"You're supposed to bet, sir," the dealer said, not unpleasantly, and again he shook his head, baffled, and started to slide off his stool, ready to flee, his eyes hurt and puzzled. The girl at the other end of the crescent table turned her head,

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slowly and wearily as though the motion pained her, and stared at him with incurious contempt.

"Oh, God!" the dealer said, and laughed, not unkindly. "It's a Basco, that's what it is! He doesn't understand a word! He doesn't want to play; he just wandered in to find a place to sit down. Well, okay—"

She reached swiftly for the cards she had cast before Eugenio, but more swiftly the girl said, sharply, "Wait—!"

A small cascade of silver dollars bounced glittering on the green felt; the girl's voice was sullen, withdrawn, grumbling: "*I'll* bet his cards; they can't be any worse than the ones you've been giving me... *What* did you say he was? Does he really not understand English?"

"A Basco, a Basque," the dealer said, and shrugged and dealt and turned cards over. "They come to herd sheep; it's a hellish job, alone in the High Country all summer and all winter. Nobody else'll take it; they can come in free of the immigration quota. Even some of *them* go crazy, kill themselves. They don't any of them speak English, only their own tongue. And a little French, or Spanish... Well, he brought you luck, honey—you win!"

"*They kill themselves?*" the girl cried softly, and swung round to stare candidly at Eugenio, who shifted uncomfortably and dropped his eyes, uncomprehending, but strangely unwilling to flee. The girl was as young as he, and probably very pretty in a scary city way, except for the shiny coloured grease on her lips and her eyelids, and for the hostile sullenness of her expression. But he saw more deeply than the hostility: with the swift compassionate instinct of a shepherd, accustomed to protecting and caring for the helpless, mindless creatures in his charge, he saw past kohl and mascara and eye-shadow to the dull agony of loss in the girl's brown eyes, and squared his shoulders and planted himself immovable upon his stool.

"*Para usted,*" the girl said laboriously, and pushed silver dollars towards him, staring intently at him, searching for some sign of comprehension. "*Vous avez gagné*... Oh, *hell*! Six words of Spanish, and about six words of French—that's what *I* have to show for about a hundred thousand dollars' worth of education! Wouldn't my father... Say, am I being picked up, d'you think?" She giggled, and for a moment the pain vanished from the brown eyes and they came alive with bright life.

The woman dealer laughed, glancing from the girl to the boy and back; she said, her voice warm and encouraging, "No.

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He hasn't got anything like that in mind. He's just seven thousand miles and a couple of years away from home, and young, and lonesome as hell... But why don't you pick *him* up, honey? The house has got enough of your money, and you can't just sit here losing every night, for something to do. Take him up to the Sky Room and buy him a drink—the bartender's a Mexican, Ramon, he can help you with your Spanish. Go on, honey—help the kid out!"

The boy Eugenio understood not one word of this, but he saw the sullenness flee from the girl's face and the mute agony from her eyes, saw her soft lips part and her breath come quick and shallow and the colour rise from her throat. He smiled encouragingly, as he would have done at the hurt ewe struggling against her pain, and when the girl slid off her stool and picked up her bag and turned to him, he rose with her to help in whatever way he could.

He had never seen anything like the Sky Room. He had never been in a lift, for that matter, and nearly panicked when the bronze doors slid shut and closed him into the windowless prison box and the floor fell away from beneath his stomach. But the hurt girl was still smiling, and seemed unafraid so long as he hovered protectively close to her, so he concealed his terror.

The Sky Room was better. It was very dark, with soft coloured lights behind a mirrored bar and muted music playing somewhere near though unseen, and strange delicate fragrances in the cool air, but all around two sides of it clear glass reached from floor to ceiling, and beyond the glass, reassuringly, were the mountains. Nearer, just below, the winking garish coloured lights of the city were spread out, but the city's strident sounds were absent; beyond the city lay the desert, strewn with jewels of light in strings and scatters; beyond the desert the mountains towered black against the star-encrusted sky. Looking from the strangeness to the near familiar, the boy felt his unease go from him and his sure strength return; knowing he could do whatever must be done, he turned back to the hurt one he had found.

The girl spoke to the small brown man behind the bar in the English tongue Eugenio did not understand, and the small man turned melting liquid eyes upon him and spoke in rippling melodious Spanish while the girl watched his face intently, half-smiling, her eyes warm with interest, her own face transfigured with the absence of the pain and the sullenness.

Smiling at her, the boy told the Mexican barman his name

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and his age and the name of his village in Eskual Herria, and the Mexican translated swiftly into English; turning to the Mexican and holding his eyes, the boy asked softly in Spanish, "What is the nature of her injury? One can see that she is very badly hurt..."

Politely, the Mexican concealed his surprise, busying himself with shaking and pouring a foaming liquid into two fragile glasses with long slender stems. Setting one glass before the girl and one before Eugenio, he answered softly, "Plainly, it is a thing not practised in your country. Nor in mine. Yet I see so many like her here, it is not necessary for me to ask... She has come here to arrange for a divorce; she has married one who no longer wants her, or whom she no longer wants, and here it is easily arranged: a few weeks' waiting, and *zip!*—they are not married any more!"

The boy's eyes went wide with shock and disbelief, but the small Mexican met his gaze soberly: it was no jest, this thing could happen here in this strange country... He looked at the girl with compassion. Slowly he said, "*Ai,* that is truly bad! I did not know that marriage could be ended, except by death. But to be so joined to another, and then rent asunder —*ai,* yes, I see the reason for her pain; I do not think I could endure it..."

The girl spoke suddenly, frowning, with a fretful querulous inflection; but before the Mexican could translate, the already-dim lights in the Sky Room went out altogether except for a single baby spot that illuminated a graceful man in top hat and white gloves and tails who came forward from the gloom where the music was.

Smiling, the man threw darts of fire from his fingertips into far corners of the room; cast white doves from nothingness to flutter off and return; caused a great plant to bloom and flower in an instant from a domonstrably empty table; produced an indisputably live rabbit from the pocket of the boy Eugenio, who had not felt its kicking presence until the very instant of its materialisation; bowed, and vanished in a puff of gaily-coloured smoke and a fanfare from the unseen musicians.

Truly, it was a wonder to be greeted by more than the ripple of laughter and light spatter of applause that stirred in the Sky Room; hastily Eugenio crossed himself and, feeling parched, drank from the tall-stemmed glass. The foamy liquid had a fresh minty taste; it cooled and refreshed his mouth, and he swallowed it gratefully.

The girl spoke again, glancing at Eugenio but addressing the

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Mexican more directly; her face was closed and hard with sullenness again, her eyes cold to conceal the hurt. Eugenio watched her as she spoke, intently trying to follow; it almost seemed that he could understand the unknown language: when the small brown man politely translated for him, he replied at once, fluidly, addressing the girl but not looking directly at her.

No, Eugenio said, he was not married. He had a *novia,* though, and they would be married in two and a half years, now, when he returned with his fortune from his contract with the Hallelujah Land & Livestock Company. He was paid, in addition to all his food and his wine, the sum of two hundred dollars a month in winter and two hundred and fifty dollars a month during the summer, when the work was harder and more lonely in the High Country; most of this money, except for his share of the eight hundred dollars the Hallelujah Land & Livestock Company had advanced to transport him from Spain to Nevada and guarantee his solvency in the United States, was being banked for him by the company and would be paid him on his departure. It would be a fortune, in a poor country like Eskual Herria; with it, a young couple could start out in life with their own farm, and a good flock of sheep. And during these three years his *novia* would not be idle: she had, of course, to perform her duties as a good daughter within her family, but with every spare hour she sewed and practised baking and studied from her mother the myriad things she would need to know, to equip and care for their home when he returned . . .

Parched from talking, he found another of the tall-stemmed glasses before him, and swallowed the minty-tasting drink; it refreshed him, but somehow left him feeling most peculiar. His ears began to buzz again, and he felt giddy as he sometimes did when he chased too fast after a lamb in the very high mountains. The bar-tender murmured something he did not hear, and the girl looked at him intently.

When she spoke her voice was less sullen, less selfish and withdrawn: "*Yo . . . tengo . . . mucho hambre, mucho apetito,*" she said, addressing Eugenio directly, grimacing as she searched for the Spanish words. "*Vamos*—uh—*comer,* hey, sport? You look kind of white, you know; I think we better get you some air, and some solid food. These stingers are murder on an empty stomach . . ."

The boy understood only that the girl was hungry. He was on his feet instantly, contritely: in his solicitude for the helplessness of the wounded creature he had not thought to offer

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food: a hurt lamb will not graze, but it should have occurred to him that human beings were not sheep.

Rebuking himself, he asked the Mexican how to reach the Santa Fe Hotel from here, and held on to the edge of the bar while he listened intently to the answer: his feet, for some reason, did not seem to reach the carpeted floor; he stood on a kind of cushion of air, and it was a precariously dizzy feeling.

The girl took his arm, and he walked very carefully to the lifts so that his strength might steady her; he was aware of the warmth of her hand through his sleeve, and her delicate fragrance and her dependence on him, but for the rest, his surroundings seemed to have receded beyond his ken.

The back dining room at the Santa Fe Hotel was closed, and the truck was gone. The herders for the Hallelujah Land & Livestock Company had gone back to the Home Ranch; it was very late—almost two o'clock in the morning.

The sleepy Basque night clerk glanced once, bitterly, at the girl, and said hotly to the boy that Peter Saralegui had searched everywhere for him before driving the others back to Home Ranch, and had left money for him: he was to hire a taxi for the thirty-mile trip back to Hallelujah Junction.

The boy took the money and said, politely but firmly, that he was sorry to have caused inconvenience; he had been talking with a friend and had somehow lost track of the time The fresh night air had steadied him; he no longer felt the dizziness or the buzzing in his ears, and thinking of finding food for the hurt girl, he began to feel quite hungry himself. And now, he said, with all the innate dignity of the Eskualduna, his friend was hungry and he desired to offer her hospitality.

The night clerk looked again at the girl and his expression changed, and his manner; he said, with warm politeness, that Reno stayed open all night and that there were a number of restaurants open now, including one just across the street in the bus terminal, but if the boy and his friend would not mind the shortest possible delay he, the clerk, would personally open the kitchen and prepare scrambled eggs and ham in Basque fashion and Basque quantities surely not obtainable anywhere else.

The boy said that he would be grateful, and the clerk turned to the girl and began politely to repeat in English what he had said, but the boy stopped him with an imperious gesture. The clerk bowed and took his leave, and the boy, using separate careful words of Spanish, copiously interlarded with gestures

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and with pictures drawn with his hands in the air, explained to the girl that they were going to eat.

She watched him, fascinated, straining for his meaning until a little crow of laughter burst from her. Taking the desk pen and turning over a registration card, she swiftly and deftly sketched a table piled high with dishes, and a man and a woman seated opposite each other, greedily wolfing food. He watched over her shoulder as the little sketch emerged, his face wreathed in a growing smile of wonder. She finished, and pointed to him and to herself and to the sketch, and lifted her eyebrows comically high in query, and he laughed aloud, nodding vigorously.

The Basque night clerk came, presently, and found them huddled in a corner of the lobby, intently conversing in an eager *mélangẽ* of charade and a litter of sketches and a counterpoint of babble in English and Spanish and Basque.

Standing hesitantly back, he heard the girl pouring out her rueful story of indulgent parents and her own wilfulness that had brought her to this tragedy, but without bitterness, only a kind of thoughtful self-examination, as though she were seeing it all for the first time; and he heard the boy describing the hardship and the peace of the work in the High Country, and the purpose that made it possible to endure it and even to cherish it. He could see plainly enough that neither fully understood the other, but he could also see that they had somehow established a communication so close that literal understanding was unnecessary, and that each was profiting by his private catharsis as well as from the simple impulse to help the other.

He did not like to interrupt, but presently he coughed and suggested that their meal was getting cold, and found that he had not interrupted them after all. They arose and adjourned to the deserted dining room and consumed enough food for a regiment, and never for a moment ceased to conduct their urgent and eager and noisy charade—nor did they seem aware of his presence.

When they left the Santa Fe Hotel at last, the stars were no longer visible, the desert sky was lightening. Reality descended abruptly upon the boy Eugenio: his working day would begin at dawn, and dawn was nearly upon him. It took him only a moment to convey to the girl that he must leave her now, and seek a taxi to take him back to Home Ranch, so close was their communication; it took her a little longer to get it through

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his head that she possessed a car—*a girl like this, with a car of her own? Even in this preposterous country, surely such a thing was impossible!*—and wished to take him to Home Ranch herself. But the incredible proved to be true enough—and such a car as he had never inspected closely before, at that: a car of enormous dimensions and glittering with bright enamel and chrome like polished silver, a car redolent with the scent of rich leather and newness, and open to the clarity of the sky above.

The girl slid across the seat, leaving the place behind the gleaming wheel for him, but the boy Eugenio shook his head: he could not drive a car. So the girl drove, carelessly and expertly, and at a speed like the wind; and the wind took her dark hair and drew it with a fluttering caress out in a long streaming tail behind her head, and when she turned her head to look at the boy, laughing now, her eyes alight with exhilaration and innocent of any trace of pain, stray tendrils of her hair whipped at her face, and she was like a nymph. The coloured grease was gone from her lips, now, and the black stuff and the shiny greasy blue stuff from her eyes; she had washed her face at the Santa Fe Hotel, and she looked even younger, and far more innocent, more natural, more vulnerable. But she did not look as though she had ever been hurt by anyone, or as though anyone would ever want to hurt her.

The great glittering car nosed cautiously over the rough stony ground behind the bunk-house at Home Ranch, bobbing and surging like a boat on silent springs; it stopped, looking very strange and somehow uncomfortable, near the truck and the four-wheel-drive pickup Peter Saralegui used to haul supplies to the herders' base camps.

The sky was streaked with pale light now and the boy Eugenio got out hurriedly: he must change his clothes before the other men emerged, and somehow he knew that the great glittering car and the girl must be gone by then—there must be no tangible remnant of the night for others to see, or the pristine memory would be sullied. And while he would not examine the memory now, there would be a time alone in the High Country, moving across the vast empty hills with the sheep, when he would consider, marvelling, such wonders as the glittering great car and the magician who threw darts of fire and created living doves and rabbits from nothingness, and the terrifying sensation of soaring aloft in a small windowless room, and other things. And the satisfying feeling of having found a wounded creature and, as is a man's duty, healed it . . .

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He hesitated, standing awkwardly beside the car, impatient to be off and groping for a proper farewell, and the girl put her head back, resting it against the luxurious leather of the seat, her face upturned to him. Her dark eyes glowed soft, quite without hostility or the memory of pain; her soft young mouth curved in a smile, and she said barely aloud, to him and to herself, "Maybe, if everybody had to earn something good for three hard years, instead of just reaching out and taking it, he'd know the worth of it... Maybe it's not too late to go to work in the high mountains, and store up some kind of a dowry..."

The boy did not understand her words, but he understood that they were not, in any case, addressed to him. He saw her eyes close, the long lashes shadowing the weariness beneath them; her face was free of any trace of strain, entirely at peace. Her lips moved, murmuring something inaudible, and seemed to reach upward towards him. He hesitated, and then touched her mouth lightly, gently, with his thick calloused fingers, and turned away and left her there, moving towards his tent with the long, strong unhurried strides of a herder with many miles to cover in a day's care of his sheep.

© Don Stanford 1966

"There's no danger of my Harry ever being henpecked, I wouldn't stand for it!"

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He saw the soldiers and went slowly towards them

HUNTER OF DRAGONFLIES

by D'Arcy Niland

HO VAN THI, in the sad method of age, went a little way past the trucks and stopped to bring the air into his lungs. He was in rags. The stick helped him to get along. He looked at the trucks each marked with a great red cross; he saw the tents and the men lying about; men with bandages on them and, like dogs, panting in the shade.

He went up to the door of the hospital. A tall shadow fell straight on him, arched like a tree that has long grown against the wind. Four other shadows fell and cooled him. He looked at all the faces; and they looked at his face, broken in wrinkles. They saw the sewn-up mouth, and the diamond-shaped eyes glazed with grape blue.

"Yes, old man?"

"I have come to see Pham Chanh Ky. He is here?"

"We will have to see."

"They told me," said the old man. "A friend. By chance it was."

"Are you a relative?"

"His grandfather."

"Wait here."

The old man sat down. The men said to him, "You will know soon."

They were young fellows. There was a hard bitterness in their eyes, a determined ruthlessness. But they laughed and "chiacked" as they looked at him. They did it from good nature, from gladness, for they reverenced age. It was just

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because they could see his nervousness, his eagerness, the little ways he showed his expected delight.

The old man thought of the boy, his grandson.

He thought of him in the garden, chasing after the dragonflies. He could see the flashing tint of the rainbow in their wings as they darted out beyond the low wall that hemmed the boy in. The boy only turned away laughing in the zest of life and play. He sat down now, a hot flame in his face the colour of a pear, and prattled. His eyes shone. The old man thought of how they talked, while the fountain chirruped, and the birds sang and flittered in the leaning branches, heavy with blue-powdered plums.

"How long will it take to grow a white beard like yours, Grandfather?"

"Seventy years it will take you, my son."

"And can I have no hair on my head soon?"

"That is for wisdom and nature to decide."

"I wish I was more than seven."

"You will be. You will be."

Then, with a loud cry, he was off again after the darting dragonflies.

The orderly came back. "Yes," he said. "He is here, old man, but you cannot see him."

"I must. I must."

"He is being operated on. You must wait."

"I will wait," said Ho Van Thi.

A young Vietnamese lit a cigarette, wiped the sweat away from under his cap. "A good soldier, Pham Chanh Ky," he said. "He fought bravely last night. The life of an officer is owed to him. He fought like a demon. You can be proud of him."

The old man made no answer; no response at all.

The young soldier drew hard on his cigarette. Another said, "You know that fellow, Pham Chanh Ky, do you?"

"We have fought together now a good while."

"They tell me he once had great riches."

"He was the son of a merchant." The soldier blew out the smoke. "Yes, they were well off. His grandfather there, he knows. Eh, old man?"

The old man looked in the dust and said nothing. He was thinking of the boy in the garden.

"You have only to look at him to see what hard times came upon the family," the soldier said.

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"These things happen."

"It's buried in the past. The brutes killed the mother. The father. They took everything, property, house, land. Gone for ever."

"That's this business for you," the other said.

"All of them—torn apart, lost to each other."

"What did Pham do?"

"What could he do? A waif running wild like all the others. He ended up in a village in the mountains, he told me. At thirteen, he was helping the partisans. At seventeen, he was among us."

"He's been through it then."

The soldier nodded. "All the way, years of it. He's tramped in blood all right. I suppose he would be a merchant now, like his father, except for the war."

"And I suppose," said the other, "I suppose the old man there hasn't seen his grandson for a long time now."

The soldier looked at the old man. "Pham never mentioned him to me. I suppose he thought he was dead. How long, old man? Eh, how long?"

Ho Van Thi did not speak. How did he know how long since he had seen the boy? Eight, nine, ten years—how did he know? All he knew was that the memory was as vivid as yesterday. He saw him there in the garden at his favourite pastime, chasing the dragonflies. He saw him blowing on the lip of a bottle and the bottle whistling; his mother laughing at him, her ear-rings bobbing like little green cucumbers; he remembered how he laughed when his father caught him and tickled his ribs. Plainly, he saw him under the blue sky, in the garden, and the serenity there was like a dream.

The old man saw the orderly come out again, and he went up to him.

"Can I see Pham Chanh Ky now?"

"He cannot see you, old man."

"Where is he?"

"They will fetch him out in a moment."

Four men brought the figure out on a stretcher. Old Ho stopped them. He lifted the blanket from the face.

What he saw was a stranger, a face that belonged to a thousand other soldiers he had seen. His lips trembled. He stared, while disappointment surged and built in him: looking for dark red lips and eyes shining like black water; for a skin glossy as a persimmon; for a vitality that showed mischief, innocence, laughter. But he saw only a mask, hard

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and dust-coloured, the mouth open, teeth protruding over blistered lips, and a glassy strip of brown eye under the lid.

The old man's hands shook. He put the blanket back gently and said nothing.

A man said, "You are his grandfather. He has no-one else. Are there any words you would like on his grave?"

Ho Van Thi only stared.

"Say, *Here lies a true soldier,*" offered one man.

"Or, *He died that we might live,*" said another.

"He knew blood and guts," put in a third. "What about: *He killed hundreds of the devils*?"

They paused.

"Well, what shall it be, old man?"

Ho did not answer; only stared and nodded his head in a dazed, feeble way. Then he heard no voices, saw no shadows. He looked up in a startled awareness. He saw the soldiers some distance off, and he went slowly towards them.

They had nearly finished their task, and he waited until they had gone. Then he stood before the rough board headstone; and because he did not know the man he had seen, but only remembered a boy in a garden, he scratched on the mound with his stick the question: *Where is he today—that brave hunter of dragonflies?*

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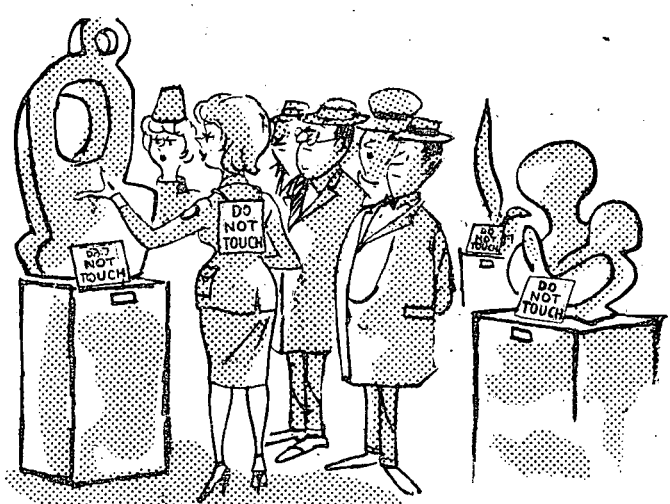

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In that moment, with a softly-spoken question, all he had accomplished was wiped away... by GERALD SINSTADT

Never a loose end

THE date of birth on William Walter King's passport suggested that he was sixty-nine. Privately, William suspected that he was a year or two older, though it was a long time since the question had crossed his mind. It didn't really seem to matter one way or the other. But now, while his nimble fingers tied neat, practised knots round the brown paper parcel, the problem sidled unbidden into his thoughts again.

There was quite a fuss, he recalled, when officialdom discovered that he had no documents—no birth certificate, no identity card, nothing. Only his own word for who he was and where he came from and all the useless details officious clerks kept wanting to enter on their silly little buff forms. Nearly thirty years ago, that was. In the end, of course, the bureaucrats gave in, and once that happened he found that they didn't much care what he said as long as he sounded positive. So he made up the information they wanted, and stuck to it. It made it easier for everyone.

William fastened the last knot and looked grimly round his little workshop. Suppose he was only sixty-nine. What difference? He was too old, anyway. When a man passed sixty he was too fixed in his habits to relish starting yet another life in unfamiliar surroundings. Going back to Linz and becoming Wilhelm Walter König again, they said, would be like going home. But he knew it wouldn't. Places changed in thirty years, new buildings arose, a district took on a fresh character, people died. He didn't want to go.

Yet there could be no alternative. They had made that quite plain. Such was the importance of the next job—William Walter King's last job—they wanted him out of the country

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before the questions started. And they knew enough to make sure that he obeyed.

Taking a razor-blade from an old oblong tobacco tin, William unwrapped the cardboard which protected the cutting edge and carefully trimmed the loose end of string. A well-made, tidy parcel, he noted proudly, the corners square, the pattern of string symmetrical. It sat in the middle of an empty work-bench. Tools of the watch-maker's trade were ranged around on racks and shelves and in trays with equally meticulous care. They were the mind of William Walter King made manifest.

Although he would never need the ball of string again, he replaced it in a corner of the drawer where it belonged. A place for everything and everything in its place, he invariably replied when a customer commented on his methodical exactness.

Ironically, he reflected, if his life had been less earnestly dedicated to orderliness he might still have been able to look forward to an undisturbed old age. When the man with cold eyes and taut lips had brought in his broken watch on the 23rd October 1951—a Tuesday, William remembered—they could have known him only as a name on a dossier. Had they found him slovenly and his workshop a shambles they might have left him alone. Instead, the man, who blandly said his name was Smith, must have been impressed. In the next fortnight they must have checked on him, had him watched, made inquiries in the neighbourhood, for when Smith returned to collect his watch he said: "Do you hear anything these days of Wolfgang Feldner?"

William would never forget that moment, when all that he had accomplished in thirteen careful years was wiped away in a single softly-spoken question. In the long silence which followed, the pulsing of his heart was a louder rhythm than the ticking of the many clocks and watches that had kept him friendly company over the years.

The question was never answered, and the man who called himself Smith never asked it again. He knew, and William knew, that he had made his point. He paid for his watch, and as he left he said: "There will be work for you to do. When you receive a letter, go to the place you are told." He went out and closed the door, leaving the little bell above it tinkling on its spring.

Wolfgang Feldner, a tall, lugubrious man who wore rimless

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spectacles—William could still picture him with vivid clarity—used to be an accountant in the small clock-making firm in Linz where William was then employed. Their common interest was chess. On the first of every month, after they had been paid, they went to a local *Gasthaus* and drank slivovitz, each paying for two rounds, and smoked their pipes, talking little as they slowly pushed pieces across the chequered board. It was a comfortable, undemanding friendship.

This had been their unchanging custom for more than three years when Feldner suddenly and unexpectedly took William into his confidence. He was in debt, he said, and could stave off his creditors no longer. He spoke wildly of suicide and, when William protested, insisted that the only alternative was to steal the money. In the small hours, after they had walked for many miles along the frozen banks of the Danube under a starry sky, William weakly allowed himself to be persuaded to manufacture a key which, together with another entrusted to Feldner, would open the company safe.

His companion tried to explain a complex system by which he intended to falsify the books after he had taken the money, but William refused to listen. Secretly, he hoped that by morning Feldner would be in a more reasonable frame of mind and could be persuaded to abandon the scheme. But during lunch the next day Feldner said that he was now threatened with action if he did not settle within forty-eight hours. So William reluctantly cut the key and then tried to dismiss the matter from his mind.

At the end of the week Feldner pressed on him a sealed envelope which contained, he discovered, a fat bundle of bank notes. The money cost William a night's sleep before he resolved to return it to Feldner and ask for the key back. But shortly before dawn he dropped into a doze, waking again with a start to find that it was already past the time when he should have been at his work-bench.

He dressed hurriedly and caught a tram into the town. It was snowing and William felt cold and hungry. Deciding that another two minutes could make no appreciable difference, he paused at a hot-chestnut seller's stall on the corner of the block where the company had its premises.

While the vender was taking off the clumsy leather glove he wore to turn the nuts, William's attention was caught by a group of figures emerging from the company's doorway. In the middle of the group, hatless and without an overcoat, was Feldner.

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A man on each side was gripping his arm just above the elbow.

Without waiting for his change, William turned and ran. He jumped for the platform of a passing tram, stumbled, and almost fell back into the road. At his lodgings, he packed a suitcase and left.

The next morning he was in Switzerland . . .

So much, or most of it, must inevitably have found its way into the files of the Linz police. After the invasion, the files, like everything else, must have been taken over. Someone with a passion as scrupulous as William's for tidy detail would have been set the task of sifting them. Eventually, he was certain to have come across the uncompleted case against Wolfgang Feldner and Wilhelm Walter König.

William deduced this before the doorbell had ceased its tinkling. But he sat and smoked his favourite long-stemmed pipe until the rich brown and black tobacco had burned away to a fine white ash without guessing how they had tracked him to his little workshop in Camberwell.

He recalled the worrying months in Switzerland, the succession of cheap hotels in town after town, the daily fear of a knock that would announce some polite but insistent Inspector of Police. The knock never came. But the problem of establishing a new identity remained. William wanted to be sure that when he chose fresh soil in which to put down roots he would never again have to live from a suitcase.

The solution stared at him one night from the front page of a Zürich newspaper. *Anschluss*, said the stark headline. At the time he failed to see the significance for him of the union of Hitler's Germany with Austria. Only when the first refugees began to trickle across the Swiss frontier did he realise how the misfortune of others might be his salvation. He remembered gathering together the documents he had so carefully preserved, taking them to a wood outside the city and watching the edges of the paper curl and blacken as he set a match to the little bundle.

William wasn't a Jew and he was careful not to say that he was whenever the British authorities were asking questions. In those confused days people were quite ready to assume that a given set of circumstances invariably added up to a given answer. William had no difficulty in presenting himself as a typical displaced middle-European, anxious to be adopted by the last bastion of freedom and democracy. When war was declared and sirens sounded over the quiet Sunday streets,

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William resigned himself to internment. It all seemed worth while when they released him later and gave him a brown card recognising him as William Walter King.

For five years William readily devoted his skill to essential war work in a factory, loyally investing the money he had left at the end of each week in National Savings Certificates. In 1947 this, together with the residue of the money Feldner had given him, enabled William to buy his own little shop not far from the Green at Camberwell. He lived quietly, acknowledged and accepted by his neighbours as a mild, friendly man who troubled no-one. When, in 1950, he became for the first time champion of the chess club he had joined at Clapham, he brought back the silver trophy, polished it respectfully and put it on show in a glass case above the counter of his shop.

Life, he felt, had dealt kindly with William Walter King.

Five months had elapsed after Smith's visit before the first letter came. It arrived one spring morning together with a manufacturer's catalogue and an invitation from the chess club secretary to play a simultaneous exhibition match on twelve boards at the next meeting.

The letter contained a single sheet of paper on which was typed: BROCKWELL PARK BANDSTAND. FOURTH ROW. END SEAT. 2.30 P.M. FRIDAY. The envelope bore an S.W.1 postmark and it had been posted the previous day.

Smith, wearing a grey mackintosh in spite of the warm sunshine, was already sitting in front of the bandstand when William arrived.

He rose at once and said: "Let's walk."

They strolled in silence for several minutes before Smith, after several times looking back over his shoulder, spoke again. Then he said: "There is work for you. It must be ready by this time tomorrow. Understood?"

William hesitated before replying. In moments of stress he was still inclined to think in German and translate his thoughts into English before expressing them.

"I don't know," he said. "I have to consider my customers, you know."

"They can wait." Smith was looking at him, expecting an answer.

"It depends what you want me to do. Until I know what it is, I don't know how long it takes."

The other man unbuttoned his coat and produced a small

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cardboard box from his pocket. "Take this," he said. "And treat it carefully."

"What is it?"

"Inside is a metal tube containing explosive and a detonator." Smith's tone was as expressionless as it had been when he had handed his broken watch across the counter. "It requires a timing mechanism to be attached. Set it for three a.m. on Sunday and return it to me, here, at this time tomorrow."

Before William could reply, Smith had turned and walked away, buttoning his coat as he went.

Back in his workshop, William had put the cardboard box on the bench and sat down to light his pipe. A lifetime of habit forced him to examine the choices open to him.

He could, he reasoned firstly, take the box to the police. What then? If they believed him they would probably insist on his keeping the rendezvous with Smith so that they could make an arrest. Fine. But in telling his story could he avoid disclosing the events which had led Smith to him in the first place? And even if the police were disposed to overlook incidents which did not directly concern them, he still had to consider Smith's compatriots. The next bomb might drop through his letter-box.

Secondly, he could do nothing. Wait and see. But Smith would surely return. And what about disposing of the explosive?

So suppose, thirdly, that he swallowed professional pride and did a bad job. Then he could return the box but it would never go off and no harm would be done. The weakness here was that even if Smith accepted that the failure was accidental, he was certain to return eventually when he wanted another job done. And William would be back where he was.

Fourthly, he could do as he was told...

The bomb was used to destroy a research laboratory in Wiltshire. Reading the newspaper accounts, William drew little comfort from the fact that the explosion occurred when there was only a watchman on the premises and that no-one was hurt.

He knew for certain now that Smith would not leave him alone.

In the years that followed William received five more letters. Each time he was given a new meeting-place. Each time Smith appeared and passed on curt instructions. Each time

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he read a few days later of some new act of industrial sabotage —and he noticed that the press reports were always vague about the nature of the work that had been disrupted. It wasn't difficult to conclude that a careful campaign was being waged against some essential facet of the secret war—the war that never for a moment ceased in a world eaten with fear and suspicion.

And now the campaign, or the particular corner of it that William had been permitted to see, was coming to an end—with something bigger and more important than anything that had gone before. Smith had been forced to explain more than he had perhaps intended, after finding that William was not at all pleased to be told that arrangements had been made for him to return to Linz. But he had been adamant that there could be no compromise. The timing mechanism was to be set for one a.m. William would hand over the parcel in the main passenger lounge at London Airport exactly twelve hours earlier. In return, he would receive the ticket for his flight to Austria, together with documents which would re-establish the identity of Wilhelm Walter König.

"But I can't," William protested. "The police—"

"The Feldner file has been removed from police records."

William was slow to grasp the implication of this remark. He asked: "How? When did this happen?"

"Who knows? Long ago, perhaps."

Now William saw the point.

"You mean there has never been any possibility of the case being reopened?"

For the first time since William had known him, Smith permitted himself a small twitch of the lips which might have been a smile.

"It is immaterial. You are bound to us by other things now."

Although he recognised that Smith's people had the resources and the ingenuity to have found a dozen other ways of ensnaring him if they had wished, William was bitter in his self-reproaches. He was angry at the ease with which he had been duped—as though he had failed to foresee the threat from a knight lurking at the edge of his favourite King's Indian defence.

William looked from the parcel on the bench to a big pendulum clock in the corner: a fine piece of workmanship and much too expensive to find a customer in Camberwell. Almost eleven o'clock.

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If he wanted to catch the coach from the Air Terminal he would soon need to leave.

Well, there wasn't much more to do. He had already written to his solicitor instructing him to arrange the sale of the shop. Looking round, he supposed that he should be feeling sorrowfully sentimental, but he could find in his heart only a cold resolute hatred for Smith and his unconcerned arrogance.

His eyes rested on an empty display case. It had contained the small silver cup which William had won outright by becoming club champion in three successive years. He hadn't wanted to take it with him as a reminder of all that Smith had stolen from him, so he had posted it back to the club secretary with a suggestion that it should again be played for annually, and asking that if they wished to remember him, it should be called in future the William Walter King Trophy. That was something permanent to leave behind, something that Smith could never touch.

He picked up his suitcase and left without so much as another glance.

Smith, as ever, was waiting. The same cold eyes, the same narrow, compressed lips, the same grey mackintosh. He took the parcel and handed William an envelope. "I am to inform you," he said, "that your services have not been unappreciated. Together with your ticket and the other documents, you will find two thousand dollars in small bills."

"Wait!" As Smith turned to go, William stopped him. He slit open the envelope with his index finger and took out the notes.

"There has never been any suggestion of an agreement between us. I have no wish to be paid for what I have done against my will."

With a sneer, Smith took back the money. As he did so, a loudspeaker announcement called forward passengers for the BEA flight to Vienna. William picked up his case and walked to the door. He guessed that Smith would make for the observation roof to ensure that nothing went wrong at the last minute.

As the aircraft taxied, William tried without success to distinguish the grey-coated figure among the waving friends and relatives. From the air, as London diminished to a strangely appealing toy-town, he looked down, wondering which of the minute cars speeding along the elevated motorway towards the city, was Smith's.

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He looked at his watch.

When he raised his eyes to the window again he was just able to discern a column of smoke rising from the narrow strip of road. Punctually to the second, William noted with a craftsman's pride, Smith had been blown to pieces by his own bomb.

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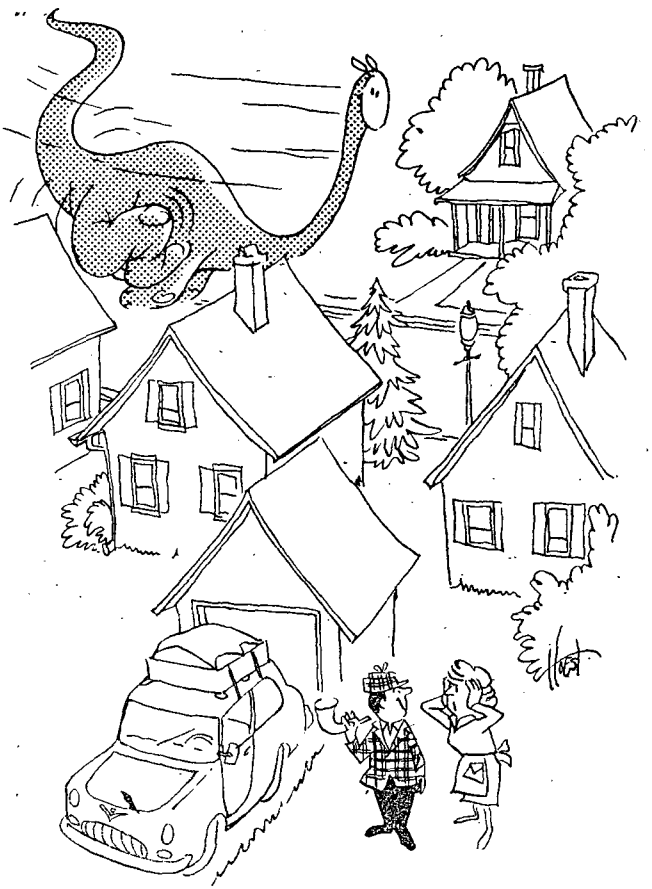

"Please—that's enough to awaken the dead!"

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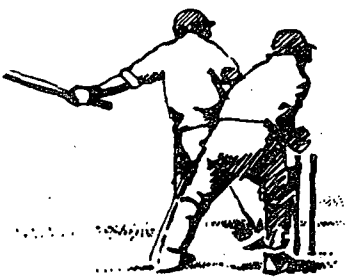
Afraid of Bats



BY L. J. DICKER

EVERY cricketer has a bad patch at some time or another and gets over it. But mine seemed to have gone pretty deep. Not only was I being got out cheaply, but my fielding had gone to pieces.

When I say that wife trouble was the cause, don't think I am putting all the blame on Millicent. The life of a first-class cricketer can be hard, very hard, on a woman. With half of the county's fixtures played away from home and as a working wife having a job to hold down, she is left to her own devices for at least half the season. Even the Sunday break in a home fixture frequently has to be sacrificed for a charity match. And after playing for six or seven days on the trot, there is such a thing as being too tired for love. It doesn't take long for a "situation" to develop. It nags at the mind, the game yields little pleasure, concentration vanishes, and things get even worse at home.

A practically non-existent love life between Millicent and I went completely for a Burton after the flaming row which developed when the question of county matches on Sundays was being talked about. According to her it was the last straw that breaks the female camel's back.

My final cricket humiliation was when I dropped a vital catch—an easy one that I should have swallowed—at the end of the Gloucester match. It was the last over; their last man was in. We had to settle for a draw and two points when we should have won and taken ten. In circumstances like this you can forget all that stuff about the game being greater than the result. The captain murmured something conventional

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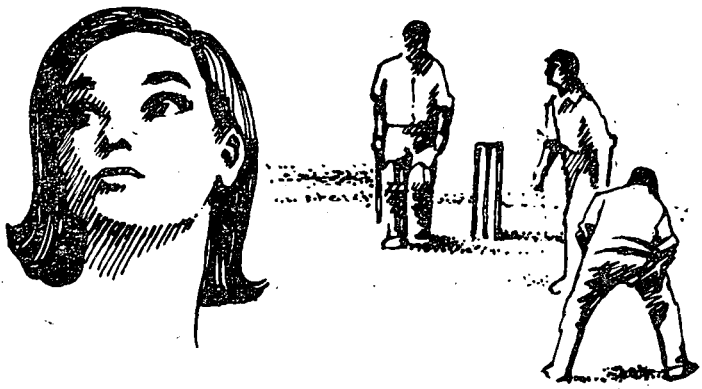

about it might have happened to anybody, but I knew what he and the other nine were thinking.

As soon as we had bathed and changed I was called into the office by the secretary, one of those former county amateurs who had taken a paid job to remain in the game. He suggested, if that is the word, that I took a week off.

"There's nothing wrong with you that a rest won't put right," he said. "You're probably a bit stale."

A polite way of saying that I was dropped, but I felt that I desperately needed that week. Millicent's job involved her being away now and again and this was one of the "nows"; but she was due back in two or three days and I had some vague idea that a weekend together might give us a chance of sorting things out.

Coming out of the secretary's office, I ran into the club's president, General Sir Reginald Franklin. From what he said and from what happened subsequently, I am fairly certain that it was an ambush.

There must be a lot of county cricketers who, in times of trouble and stress, would have thrown the whole thing up had they not had someone to turn to. The general was our particular father-figure. I gather that in his days of active soldiering he told his officers that they should be able to tell from a man's bearing whether he had any worries and it was their job to sort them out. He put his theory into practice with the county team and we loved him for it. His intelligence sources were pretty good too, and he knew most of what there was to know about the background of every player. Not that

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he needed any very deep sources to find out all about me and Millicent. In his capacity as a company chairman, he was her boss.

"I've got just the cure for you," he said. No leading up to the subject. No beating about the bush.

"It's got pretty deep-seated," I replied.

"I know that and so does Lady Franklin. What we would like is for you to spend a day or two at our place—more if you like—until your wife gets back. Send the car round to your place in an hour."

The hustle was typical. He gave me no chance to demur. Not that I felt like doing so. An empty house is no place for a cricketer or, I suppose, for anyone else who has just been declared redundant.

If the general's idea was to take my mind off first-ball ducks and dropped dollies, he certainly succeeded. I found myself a member of what turned out to be a small house party. Young people mostly. But the invitations appeared not to have been issued in any set pattern and certainly not in couples. If Lady Franklin was trying her hand at match-making, however, she had boobed in one small detail. The girls were in a majority of one until I arrived. And if another male was due, he did not turn up in time for dinner.

In all the circumstances, feeling as I did, you will not be surprised when I tell you that I was soon paying more attention than convention required to my left-hand neighbour at dinner, a girl rejoicing in the name of Cerise which, she explained, her parents must have bestowed on her when they thought she might be more of a redhead than the genuine blonde she undoubtedly was. By that I mean not so blonde as to look artificial. Blonde and figure-perfect and wearing the only kind of dress that really sets off that colouring—black, with an almost daringly low neckline. Her blue eyes invited confidences and promised sympathy.

If I needed some sort of escape, this was the prescription. Having been well relaxed by perfect food and wine, we got around to dancing to a record player. "Record player" is a somewhat inadequate description of the high-fidelity instrument that the general and his lady had installed at Hurleycombe Manor. The music was dreamy.

"Don't believe in this twisty stuff," our host confided. "All the fun in dancing is having the girl in your arms, not three paces away."

He led off with Cerise and when the dance finished, returned

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her to me with a cheerful, not to say knowing, "All yours, my boy."

"That sounded like a father giving the bride away," I told Cerise as we took the floor. "Do you come here often?"

"Often enough. They generally rope me in for a party."

"How did you manage to get in with them?"

"I act with the Newchester Rep. The general and his wife are honorary directors. They often give parties when we put on new shows."

"I wouldn't mind playing a love scene with you."

"You'd need an Equity card."

By now our cheeks were touching and I held her even closer.

"Blackleg," she whispered.

"Honorary membership for the evening?"

"We don't have evenings in the theatre. Only nights—apart from matinées, of course."

Naturally, I reminded her that this was no matinée.

That was the way we talked. Bantering conversation with an undertone of invitation. If Cerise was playing a part (and you never know with actresses), she was certainly convincing. The moment came—and you will be expecting this—when I led her on to the stone balcony that overlooks the rose garden. We spent rather a long time there and I admit that I forgot cricket, domestic upsets and just about everything else in the nearness of Cerise.

Parting was hard when the time came. The music had stopped and the general was dispensing night-caps. For appearances' sake we behaved with some circumspection during the late-night drinks session, though we could hardly kid ourselves that our absence in the July moonlight had not been noticed.

The general gave me one of the largest Scotches I have ever had anywhere. "Make you sleep," he said. "Breakfast any old time or not at all, as you like. But Perkins will be along with a tray of tea about nine."

I don't know what Cerise drank but I fancy it was more mineral than alcohol. We did manage a whispered word or two before we went upstairs.

"All alone in a big double bed," I said—playfully, I assure you.

"I've only got a single one . . . and I lock my door."

"I never lock mine. Makes things easier."

"Whatever can gallant sir mean by that?"

"Getting out if there's a fire, of course."

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"Better make sure it's unlocked tonight. I smell burning."

That great big Scotch was having its effect: I was drowsy. The bedclothes had been turned back, my pyjamas laid out and the window-drapes drawn. I remember that I opened the curtains after I had undressed because plenty of fresh air seemed called for and, by force of habit, I took the right-hand side of that vast bed—the standard side for husbands and, I presume, lovers. All of which did nothing to prevent my going to sleep, thinking of those short hours with Cerise and an unlocked door.

I have no doubt (or have I?) that it was the general's intention that I should sleep deeply and remain in a deep sleep until the morning tea arrived. What happened was that I slowly came to after I-don't-know-how-long. It might have been minutes. It might have been hours. At the moment I opened my eyes, someone was just completing the act of closing those window-drapes again. As the last finger of starlight (the moon was round the other side of the house) was shut out, I saw just enough contour to realise that my visitor was a woman. I must have started to say something like, "Who's there?" as she approached the bed. She pressed a hand on my lips to ensure my silence. In a moment she was beside me.

It all sounds very bold and practised on her part, but I had the firm impression that there was diffidence in her movements, as if she were uncertain of her reception. Her heart was beating quickly and I could imagine traces of a blush.

But as I placed my arms around her, the reserve dropped. The passion of her kisses matched mine. The more I caressed her, the closer she seemed to place herself. It was almost as if we were competing with each other. It was inevitable that we would reach the ultimate in love-making and when we did, it was the most complete I have ever known and so complete that we soon fell into that deep sleep which follows when a man and a woman have been so utterly at one.

I was the first to awake. The woman beside me did not stir until I said, "Come in," in reply to the knock that announced Perkins and the tray of tea. Then she pulled the bedclothes over her head as if to avoid recognition when Perkins went to the windows to let in the light of day.

"It's all right, Milly darling," I said, and when we were alone again I kissed her with nearly all the fervour we had experienced in those precious minutes, hours before.

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"You got back earlier than you thought," I speculated as we drank our tea.

"I was ordered back," she replied. "Telegram from the general. He told me to come straight here and waited up for me. Real hospitality. Told me where to find you and up I came, trying not to disturb you. I wasn't certain how you would react."

"Everything all right now?"

"Wonderful, sweetheart."

"Suppose, just suppose," she mused later, "that I had been someone else who came into this room by mistake. Would you have known?"

"Of course."

"How?"

"You always close the curtains. You know how you hate the idea of birds and bats in your bedroom."

"Nothing else?"

"Well—it isn't on your passport as an identifying mark but you know, and I know, that there's a tiny mole . . ."

"And you didn't take long to find it."

After breakfast the general got me on my own.

"By the way," he said, "just in case you're interested, our little friend Cerise had to leave early. Told me to say cheerio and thank you for looking after her."

"You mean called away suddenly?"

"Oh no. She always intended to get away at half-past eight. Seeing the Rep. producer about a part. Expect you'd like first-night seats. Wonderful little actress isn't she?"

Well that's the absolutely unexpurgated story of how Milly and I found each other again. As I said, welfare is the general's long suit.

I wish I could say that when I returned to the county team the following week I celebrated with a century. But things have a habit of not producing the story-book ending. In point of fact I got another first-ball duck.

The bowler gave me the friendliest possible greeting—a long hop on the leg stump. I leaned back, really got hold of it, and belted. But fine leg got his hands to it, turned a couple of somersaults under the impact and came up triumphantly with the ball in his hands.

I laughed.

Somehow it didn't seem to matter any more.

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That emotional tug-of-war between parents and child is cheerfully drawn here by Mary Bolté and Bill Mauldin

How to win over your children

Never hug them in front of company

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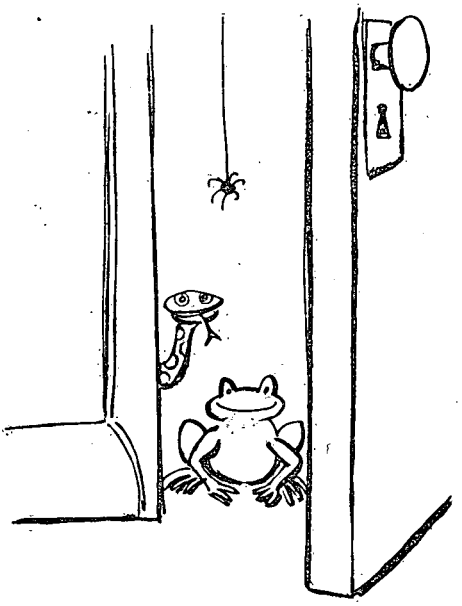

Invite in
lonely animals

Prove you're cleverer
than they are

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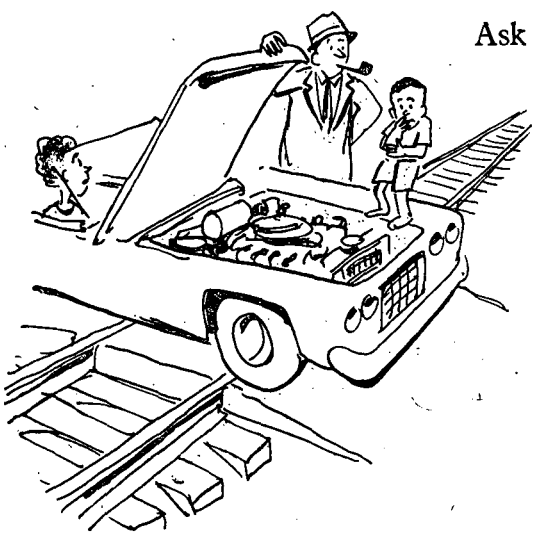
Take it easy
on baths



Ask their advice

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In church
just pretend to sing

Marvel at their
jokes

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Listen to them

Say "I love you"

often

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by Harry Mark Petrakis

Prison

Love had sentenced him, confined him more securely than any bars

HARRY KLADIS met Alexandra when he was forty-five and she was forty. For twelve years he had worked with his father in their small sweet shop. She was a librarian at the local branch. He admitted to himself that she was not very pretty and a little older than he would have wished, but he was drawn to her by the soft abundance of dark hair that she wore to her shoulders and by an air of shyness he suspected concealed loneliness as distressing as his own.

One night after she had been coming into the sweet shop for almost three months, he mustered the courage and asked to take her out. He was so pleased when she accepted that he insisted she take three pounds of her favourite chocolate mints as a gift.

On their first date they walked for hours and talked endlessly. In the beginning, they tried shyly to suggest they were accustomed to dating many others. After a while this posturing seemed foolish to both of them. He told her about a girl, handsome and raven-haired, that he had lost to a bolder man years before. She told him of a salesman, tall with sensitive eyes, who held her devotion until, transferred to another territory, he ceased to answer her letters. These melancholy recitals drew them together. They were delighted to find they both enjoyed concerts and chop-suey with black pekoe tea and almond biscuits. After a month of seeing each other several evenings a week, they accepted with grateful happiness that they were in love.

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Two weeks before the day scheduled for their wedding, Harry's father died. Returning from an evening with Alexandra, Harry found the old man in the back room of the shop, where he had suffered a stroke while mixing a batch of fresh milk chocolate.

They recognised it would have been unseemly to marry so close upon death and they delayed their wedding for a few months. Harry wished to sell the shop as soon as possible. He had studied accounting some years before and considered taking additional courses to qualify himself for that profession. But his mother insisted he keep the thin security of the shop that was all her husband had left to provide for her old age. The first weeks after the funeral seemed merely to sharpen the blades of her sorrow.

"My father and I were all she ever cared for," Harry said to Alexandra. "He is gone now, but she wonders what will happen to me if I sell the shop and cannot make a go of accounting."

"You will be a good accountant," Alexandra said. "I have my job to help out. It will be better for your mother in the long run."

"I should have made the decision years ago," Harry said, and he was ashamed. "I never really cared for the shop—I have just let the years slide by." He turned away to conceal his distress. "Just a while longer," he said. "I don't want to press Mama in her grief now. Just a little longer."

But he could not make chocolates as well as his father, and business fell off. The price he might have received for selling the shop declined as well. He worried and worked for longer hours. At the end of six months from his father's death they postponed their wedding once more.

His mother's continued despair confused him and made him unhappy. They tried to include the old lady in the things they did, but she did not care for music and could not stand the sight or smell of chop-suey. In desperation, to appease her relentless grief, they spent most of their evenings at home with her. She talked ceaselessly of the past and of joining her husband in death, to remove herself as a burden on Harry. He spent the evening assuring her of his love and devotion. The only moments he managed alone with Alexandra were during the brief period when he walked her home. Then, bedevilled by an evening of his mother's laments, he had little to say.

He insisted that Alexandra attend the concerts alone. He

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remained behind to listen to his mother stitch the bleak patches on the hours before he could flee to bed.

"Sitting in with me instead of being out with her," his mother said, and a long sigh came racked from her flesh. "She must resent me and blame me for so much."

"She does not blame you for anything, Mama," Harry said. "She has never spoken a single word against you."

"I want you to marry," his mother said. "I want you to be happy." She looked in dismay at her son. "You were our only child. You are my life now. I would swear to die tonight if you thought I did not want your happiness."

"Stop it now," Harry said. "When Alexandra and I are married, you will live with us and we will look after you."

The old lady shook her head sombrely. "You were two years old when your father's sister Sophoula died," she said. "The last ten years of her life she lived with us. I bathed her and fed her and cleaned up her slop. I would say my prayers at night and ask God to forgive me because I hated her on my back and wished her dead." She paused, and with her dark dried fingers made her trembling cross. "There were nights I would hear her calling to me," she said. "I would hold my ears and make out I was asleep. And she would call in a voice like a bird for a long time." She bared her teeth in a harsh and cold smile. "My sins have come home to roost. I am the old woman now."

"What more can I say, Mama?" Harry asked. "As long as I live I will love you and look after you. And Alexandra will love you as I do."

The old lady looked at him silently for a long time. He felt himself reduced to the condition of a child—unaware of reality and the grim shades of life. She rose slowly and heavily to her feet. Harry kissed her goodnight with tenderness. For a moment she clung to him fiercely. He felt her fear of death and loneliness riot through his own flesh.

Winter passed into spring. The hours of daylight grew longer. From blossoming gardens in the park, came the aroma of new flowers. Within the foliage of trees sounded the shrill-throated songs of birds. In the twilight, the moths writhed their wings about the street-lamps. The young lovers whispered and laughed in the sheltered groves away from the paths.

With the coming of spring, Harry and Alexandra felt their spirits rising. Sunday afternoons they spent looking for an

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apartment with an extra bedroom. They talked confidently of the future. The season filled them with new strength.

On the last Sunday in April they found a bright apartment not far from the park and only a few blocks from the library and sweet shop. Alexandra was enchanted with it, but Harry could not subdue his apprehension. He could already feel the dark sombre attendance of his mother. And closing their bedroom door at night would not shut out her brooding presence.

Afterwards they walked silently in the park. They passed old men with bony faces who sat on benches like withered roosters soaking up the sun, old men who bore the marks of neglect and impending death.

"We will take the apartment!" Harry spoke in a furious effort to break free. "We will go back and take it."

"You did not want it," Alexandra said quietly. "We have been searching for a place like that for weeks and when we found it you did not want it."

He fumbled helplessly for her hand and felt her slim-boned fingers against his palm. "In every room I could feel my mother," he said. "As though all the curtains were drawn and the shades pulled down."

"She cannot live alone," Alexandra said. "We have to work it out."

"She is sure we will come to hate her," he said. "Maybe she is right. I love her and feel a terrible pity for her. I love you, too, and I don't know what to do."

They paused before a deserted bench and sat down. He put his arm around her slim shoulders and drew her close to him.

"When I found you I had given up hope of love," she said quietly. "I had put that dream away like a flower pressed between the pages of a book." She moved her head slightly and he felt her breath against his throat. "Now I brush my hair as I did when I was a girl. Every mirror makes me realise I am no longer young. I want you to love me and find me beautiful. I want you to love me before I grow old."

"We will work things out," Harry said, and for a moment tightly closed his eyes. "We won't lose each other. We will work things out."

Summer passed. The hours of daylight grew shorter. Dusk and dark advanced as the autumn nights closed in. The earth stirred and waited for the winter.

His mother grew more feeble. She could not bear to be

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alone and in the afternoon had a neighbour help her to the shop. She sat in a corner and watched Harry as he worked. In the evening the neighbour returned and took her home, so that she could prepare Harry's supper. She sat watching him silently as he ate.

Afterwards he helped put her to bed. She was driven with fear that death would claim her while she slept, so she delayed sleeping as long as possible, holding Harry's hand and talking aimlessly of the past.

There were moments when she looked at her son with a strange burning pity. "There is no answer for us on this earth," she said and made her cross. "God save you by taking me soon."

When she slept, Harry went to his bed on the couch in the next room and lay awake for a long time. Finally, weary and tormented by his thoughts, he fell asleep.

In December of that year Harry and Alexandra parted. They had been seeing each other less frequently as the weeks passed, each meeting marked by a silent grievance and rebuke. They were lonely away from one another and yet miserable when they were together. He made the suggestion, trying to hold back his tears, and she mutely agreed.

That night Harry did not go home. He knew his mother would be in terror at being alone, but he remained all night in the shop and mixed more chocolate than he would be able to use in months. He kept all the lights burning and tried furiously to keep busy. In the dawn, when weariness finally overcame him, he sank down on a chair and laid his head on the table smelling of sweet chocolate. In that moment he envied his father who was dead.

For almost three years Harry did not see Alexandra. From an acquaintance, he knew she still worked at the library. He was often tempted to walk by the library in the hope of catching a glimpse of her. He was afraid she might see him and this kept him away. He saw her often in his dreams. Her thin mournful face and the long hair about her pale cheeks and her slim fingers quiet in her lap. In the morning he woke unrested and faced the day with a burden on his heart.

His mother grew a little stronger. Now that she had him to herself, she made fewer demands upon him and let him alone.

They never spoke of Alexandra.

He had always been careful about his diet, but as time went

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on he ate as much as he wished and gained weight. When he shaved in the morning he was repelled at how suddenly he seemed to have aged. He was not yet fifty but he felt much older.

More and more did the pattern of his life assume the dimensions that had governed the last years of his father. He rose early and went to the shop. He worked through the day, and in the evening went home to eat the supper his mother prepared. Afterwards, he sat and read the paper while she rocked silently in her old chair. When she was in bed he smoked a cigar as furtively as his father had done, because she had always complained about the rank odour. He had trouble sleeping and, after a while, began using sleeping pills that a doctor prescribed.

In the beginning of the fourth year after he and Alexandra separated, his mother died. A cold had plagued her for several weeks. She ran a high fever and had to be moved to the hospital. The fever blazed up and down in spurts while she struggled fiercely to live. A priest came and dispensed the last rites. She died late one night in her sleep.

After the funeral Harry returned to the flat alone. He walked slowly about her bedroom. Every possession of hers, every article of clothing or spool of thread, seemed to belong to someone he could hardly remember. He felt suddenly as if she had been dead for a long time.

He went for a walk. Without awareness of direction he found himself across the street from the library.

In a panic that Alexandra might see him for the first time in three years, on the day of his mother's funeral, he fled back home.

In the next few days he kept thinking about Alexandra. He yearned to go to her and yet shame kept him away. He studied himself in the mirror and mourned how seedy he had become. He determined desperately to diet again and brushed his hair in a way that concealed as much as possible the growing patch of baldness.

After closing the shop in the evening he detoured on his way home to pass the library. He stood hidden in the darkness of the small park across the street. When she came out and started to walk home, he knew that he still loved her and had always loved her.

One night when he stood beneath the shadow of the trees, a longing to talk to her overcame his shame and fear. When

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she emerged from the library he crossed the street and called out her name.

It was a strange moment. She did not seem surprised to find him there. He was stunned at the sight of her and the changes that three years had made. She looked much older than he remembered, the last traces of youth gone. He trembled, knowing that he, too, had changed and that she might see her own ravages reflected in him.

They walked home together as they had done so many times in the past. He was careful not to walk too close beside her. For a while they were silent and then they spoke a little. She had become head librarian. He mentioned a concert he had attended a few months before.

They paused before her building. He was about to say goodnight and try and muster the courage to ask to see her again.

"Would you like some tea?" she asked quietly.

For a moment, choked by gratefulness, he could not speak. They walked slowly up the stairs. He sat in her small parlour while she heated water in the kitchen. Everything appeared the same. The rows of books and records in the corner, the photograph of her dead parents, the small plaster bust of Beethoven on the mantel. The room even retained the delicate scent of her powder and he leaned back slightly and closed his eyes. He felt, for an overwhelming moment, that he was back where he had always belonged.

She brought in the pot of tea and set the cups upon the small table. She poured carefully and filled a plate with a few almond biscuits. He had not eaten them in years.

"Do you still like chop-suey?" he asked gently.

She shook her head. "Not any more," she said.

Her hands, pale and slim-fingered, moved restlessly about the cups of fragrant tea.

"I don't care for it any more either," he said. He was silent for a long moment, wondering if he had suggested too much.

When he finished his tea he rose slowly to his feet. He wanted to stay longer and yet was afraid to ask.

She brought him his coat. "You have gained weight," she said.

He fumbled hurriedly into the concealment of the coat. "I have started to diet again," he said.

"Your cheeks have no colour," she said. "And you are going bald."

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He made a mute and helpless gesture with his hands.

"Do you find me changed?" she asked and a certain tightness had entered her voice.

"Hardly at all," he said quickly. He was sorry the moment he uttered that naked lie.

"Three years have passed," she said, and the words came cold from her lips. "I was not young when you first met me. I am much older now."

"Alexandra." He felt a furious need to console her. "Alexandra," he drew a deep breath and then could not control the wild tumble of words: "can you care a little for me again? Can you let me love you once more?"

She made a stiff and violent motion of her arm to silence him. He was shocked at the fury blazing suddenly in her eyes.

"Three years are two words," she said. "Two words easy to say. But three years are a thousand lonely nights and a thousand bitter cups of tea and a thousand withered flowers."

She raised her hand and struck him hard across the cheek. "For the thousand lonely nights!" she said and the words came in flame. "For the thousand bitter cups of tea! For the thousand withered flowers!" She struck again, more fiercely than before.

He turned then and fled. He went quickly out of the door, down the stairs to the pavement, across the street into the darkened doorway of a closed shop.

He stood there, seeing the dark reflection of his face in the glass, and felt his heart as if it were about to burst.

He began to cry, the tears running down his stinging cheeks. And he did not know in that terrible moment of despair whether he was crying for Alexandra or for himself.

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SOLUTION to ARGOSY CROSSWORD (JULY ISSUE)

Across. 1, *French-polishers.* 7, *Good morning.* 10, *Test matches.* 14, *Caw.* 15, *Cos.* 16, *Intra.* 17, *Singe.* 18, *Tones.* 20, *Comet.* 21, *Wye.* 22, *Rut.* 23, *Rocket range.* 26, *Storm signal.* 29, *Down in the depths.*

Down. 1, *Financial wizard.* 2, *Noose.* 3, *Hid.* 4, *Ion.* 5, *Hinge.* 6, *Sorry spectacles.* 8, *Mamba.* 9, *Rites.* 10, *Twister.* 11, *Satanic.* 12, *Hangman.* 13, *Sceptre.* 19, *Steam.* 20, *Corgi.* 24, *Often.* 25, *Grasp.* 27, *Ran.* 28, *Gad.*

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BY B. L. JACOT

SWINGIN' CHICK

HE was lost in his book on the terrace and the noise passed him by. A scholarly type with untidy hair, ignoring the others throwing Rog into the swimming-pool.

But now his eye rested on Sandra as she stood in the sun—and she had noticed this habit of resting the eye before.

"You don't like this place?" she asked.

"It's the people," he explained. The voice was pleasant but he looked full of frustration.

"Well, they turned this country estate into a student rest centre, didn't they?"

"Rest!" He marked his place in the book with a finger and got up. "The place is overrun. Overrun by these far-out types and they all follow you around like boy scouts," he added.

"Not like any boy scouts I've known up to now."

"Juvenile delinquents. They throw each other into swimming-pools and laugh like drains. They tightrope along balcony rails and the females of the tribe squeal. You, surely, move in a different world? I promise myself you are on a higher level for sure. Forgive me. Just a thesis to pass the idle hour."

She wasn't too sure what a thesis was. But he had a soft-spoken way and looked rather shy. "So?" she prompted him.

"Leave the local yokels to their yokel revels," he said superciliously.

They got no further then, for at that moment Ches came by,

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propelling himself in a wheel chair. He caught Sandra up and carried her off with her legs waving in the air.

Next day he was there again in his chair, reading the book and looking somewhat reminiscent of Gregory Peck when otherwise engaged than in fighting whales.

"I'm glad to see you survived," he mentioned, standing up at once this time. "Have you given any thought to what I postulated?"

Wasn't "postulated" someone who died before you could give him the medal?

"You only live once," she said.

"Yes, indeed."

"You think I should sit and read books all day?"

"By no means," he hastened to say. "Certainly not. Not at all. One could suggest—" A body sailed through the air and fell with a thud on the manicured turf of the lawn. "Good lord!"

Two of Sandra's closest escorts, stripped to the waist, had been making like the hippopotami on TV and, panting, they now paused to grin at her.

"You appear on the scene and what follows?" he said. "Horseplay."

"Innocent fun."

"You are surrounded, hemmed in by people who ride motor-cycles, play the piano all day, wrestle, swim, dance and above all make a noise."

"It takes all sorts," she suggested.

"Some more than others. I refer to the piano-player with the two-handed punch." He paused to watch her as if weighing something very important up. "Would you pardon a digression?"

Well, she knew what a digression was, anyway. "I pardon almost anything."

"The notion came to me that the man must sleep under the instrument."

"Why should you worry where Chris sleeps?"

"I picture the lad waking up every now and then and having another go." His dark eyes behind the glasses seemed to be absorbing her. "You are not by any chance a swingin' chick?"

"What are you looking at me like that for?"

"You draw them as a candle draws a moth. You rouse the libido in the male. You stir the elemental and they gather

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round in an impenetrable fence. Any male who sees you just does not want to see anything else. He only wants to make a noise and horse around . . . Leaving room only at the edges for one to look over their shoulders."

"What's the book you're reading?" she asked. First boy scouts and now libido! She had been trying to read the title upside down. "*Gone With the Wind*?"

"As a matter of fact, no." An air of embarrassment caused him to withdraw a little. "Gregory on the Gamma Particle," he said. "You could call me Greg."

"You're a *scientist*? You mean—you wrote it?"

Now he really was off-beat and harrassed. "To get back to our very informative little discussion. It's strange I should have this dire premonition about your friend Chris. Your closest friend, too."

"What premonition? You mean you've dreamt something is going to happen to Chris? Something awful, for heaven's sake?"

"Just enough," he stated. "Take the young bulls of the herd. The biggest shover of the lot gets the comeliest cow the boys are all after."

"Comeliest cow," she echoed. "The lovely things you think up to say! And," Sandra added, "for a character who writes books about atoms and things you talk quite a lot of hooey."

"The cock with the loudest crow gets the choicest chick. I don't know how it is with monkeys, but—"

"Save it," Sandra begged, "for some other time."

That evening, someone spilt a pint of bitter into the works of the grand piano and the incident led to such unpleasantness that Chris was asked to leave the next morning in his souped-up Ford Anglia with the notice at the back: *Don't come any closer or I'll scream!*

"Very sad," the professor said, next day. "But more peaceful, don't you think? You wouldn't care, I suppose, to stroll?"

She said: "Chris swears blind he never had any pint of beer."

"Why," he asked as they walked on the lawns, "does your friend Ches have to tear up and down the road approach to this house on that very noisy motor-cycle?"

"It's a private road," she said. "His licence has been suspended and he can't ride on public roads. Is that wheelbarrow worrying you?"

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He was wheeling it aside. "Looks untidy on the lawn," he said. "I have a thing about order."

They had scarcely reached the cedars when the roar of Ches' motor-cycle shattered the morning. Ches might have made the bend but he ran out of road trying to avoid a wheelbarrow by the bushes... Sandra finally got through to Ches' mother in St. John's Wood and the doctor let her take Ches home.

The following morning the professor was in his chair, reading the thick book, and he rose at once. "I trust your friend with the racing motor-cycle is doing as well as can be expected?"

"He will live," Sandra said, nastily.

"The whole concept rests on holding the animal's eye," he said.

"What animal is this?" she asked and he pointed with his long finger to a goat on the terrace. Two of her escorts were making like bull fighters with the furious beast, using their shirts as capes when he charged.

"The inferior creature suspects you have something he hasn't as long as you stare him down. Your boyfriends are more intelligent than I thought. But, if you lose his attention, even for a moment, you've had it. One could test a theory that occurs to me."

"Same thesis?"

"It refers."

"So what?"

The two goat fighters and the goat stood poised, motionless and tense, waiting the next move, eyes locked.

"You sing out *yoo-hoo*."

Sandra called: "*Yoo-hoo!*"

When they telephoned that evening from the cottage hospital the report was that the goat fighters were as comfortable as could be expected. It was Sandra who took the message in the office and she found the professor waiting at the door. He was dressed in a black silk dinner-jacket. And he was surveying her gravely.

"If you think I'm going out with you—" she began, furious at something. Maybe a thesis.

"I have a confession to make."

"Go and have a romp with a couple of gamma particles," Sandra suggested frostily.

"Which brings us back to where we came in. I never wrote any book. I never said I did."

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"You told me—you let me believe—"

"It's about all they could do to teach me to read." He stepped closer and took her hand. "I can't play the piano and I don't fight goats," he said.

"I can't say I care much for goats, either," she found herself admitting after a while. "But you had a nerve to dress yourself up and come shouting."

"A testimonial to myself," he explained. "I feel I earned it, or don't you agree?"

"So what's the thesis this time?"

"I know a place on the river where we could eat and maybe dance a little. Would you mind doing that?"

"An evening out?"

"More or less."

"The comeliest cow?" she asked.

"Choicest chick. My swingin' chick. Just make up your mind."

"We could try it on for size," she said. "Let's go."

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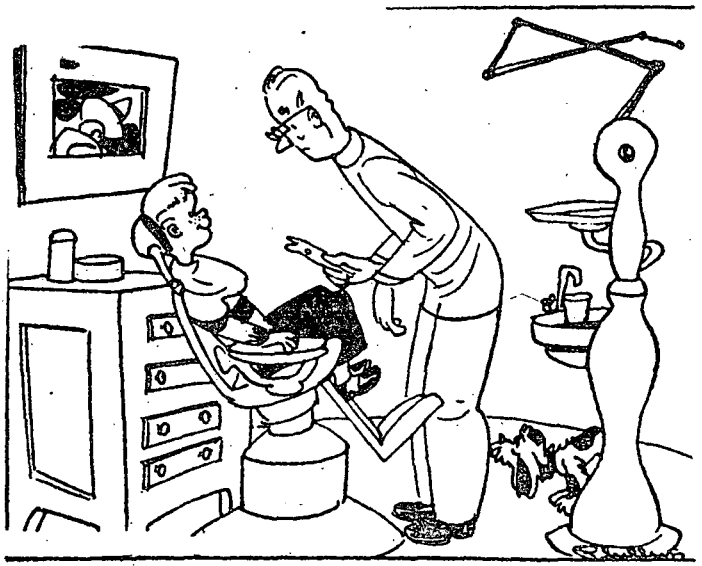

"You'll know when you're hurting me— my dog will bite you on the leg."

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racing quiz

1. From which date is a racehorse's age calculated?
2. How old was the youngest rider to win the Grand National?
3. How many times has "Arkle" been beaten in a steeplechase?
4. Which is the world's longest racecourse?
5. When was the last time a horse owned by the Sovereign won the Derby?
6. Where are the following Grand Nationals run: (a) Irish, (b) Scottish, (c) Welsh?
7. Does the Derby course bend to the left or the right?
8. What was the weight of the lightest jockey ever to ride in a race: (a) 3 st. 11 lbs., (b) 3 st. 7 lbs., (c) 4 st. 2 lbs.?
9. Is there a flat race open to women?
10. Who was on the throne when Royal Ascot opened?
11. Which is faster—a greyhound or a racehorse?
12. How many times did Sir Gordon Richards win the Derby?
13. How old is the Jockey Club?
14. What are the Queen's racing colours?
15. Who won the Cesarewitch Stakes in 1964?

Answers are on page 117

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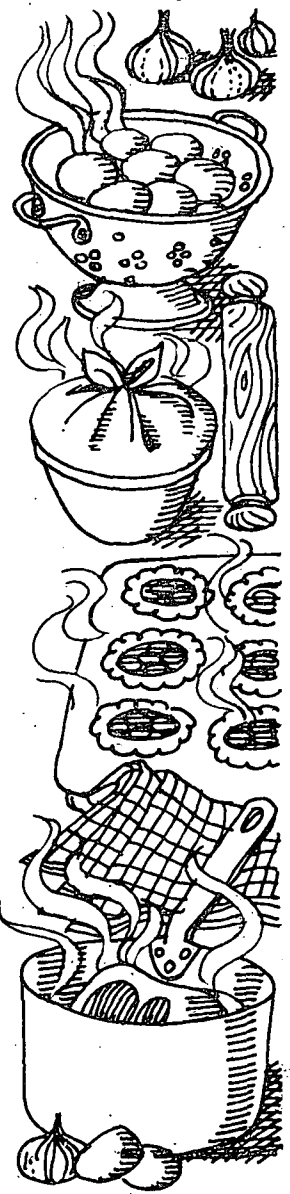
by John Lennon

FOOD OF LOVE



A WEDDING ring is just a vicious circle, and the man who said that is nobody's fool. It was me. I've seen many a good man struggle against the old nine-carat knuckle-duster, but none better than Danny Macbride. Before Danny arrived there were just the four of us, and if I told you about the other three you'd never believe me. So I will.

First there was Brannigan! He was red-haired, built like a bull and with that many freckles you couldn't tell whether he was laughing or crying. Then poor, soft Wee McGinty: he was as little as Brannigan was big, and had enough empty space in his head to plant a crop of spuds. McGinty couldn't even tell the time, except when it was knocking-off time. Then he had a homing instinct like a pigeon. Lastly, there was Sullivan: he had no hair at all, and a mashed-up face that must have made his poor mother wince. As true as my name's Riley, I never seen a man drink like Sullivan. He'd take anything from cold tea to metal-polish; and whiskey he'd sup from the end of a drainpipe. There were four of us then, all from Ireland and living at Widow Bundy's house.

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I suppose we had no call to grumble really, but the truth of the matter was she didn't feed us enough. That sums up the whole situation in a nutshell. And with us working on a power-station job and doing the slog of ten men, we needed food. Each night we'd get home, like as not clogged up to the knee-caps with mud and clay, with a hunger that was a gift from God—empty, with stomachs that echoed to the touch. And each night Widow Bundy would march in, set down the potatoes, the piece of flesh she called meat and the loaf of bread, with the finality of death itself. That was it.

"It isn't enough," whined little McGinty one night when she'd gone, "it's nothing—just nothing."

"Right enough," Sullivan agreed, "my poor old bones is only hanging together on a drop of stout."

"You give me the belly-ache," I told them. "Why is it you're always plaguing me the whole time? Why don't you tell the old widow yourself?"

"And get tipped out?" demanded Brannigan. "Where in the world would we get anyone here to take in the likes of us?"

And he was right. She had us by the hair of the head and she knew it. It was either Widow Bundy's or the labour camp on the job, where you could get your ribs stove in for sneezing. Anyway, something happened.

It was on a Thursday—I remember the day as if I'd paid a bill. Twelve hours it drizzled, a soft, cunning rain that sopped your clothes in no time and hardly let the light of day through. We'd had a cruel day, down seven feet in six inches of water and not a smoke between us. Widow Bundy's meal had made fools of our stomachs and there wasn't a word left in the four of us.

McGinty sat on his bed running one raggity sock between his toes. Brannigan was flat on his back sucking a butt-end that any self-respecting tramp would step on. Sullivan was sat gazing at an empty beer-bottle with a look of agony on his face.

Then we heard someone coming up the stairs.

"It's herself," said McGinty, always first in with anything easy.

There was a knock, a respectable pause and she poked her head round the door. "Are you all decent?" she asked, darting her parrot-eyes round the room.

"We are that, Mrs. Bundy," I said, "will you come in?"

She did, wrinkling her nose at McGinty's sock, and that's

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when we first set eyes on Danny Macbride. She patted him into us with a loving care I never would've believed.

"This," she said, "is Daniel Macbride, a countryman of yours and a newcomer to your job. He will have the bed in the corner and I hope and trust you will take good care of him." So saying she turned and gave him a smile that would curdle the milk.

"I'll be keeping an eye on him myself," she informed us, "kindness to a stranger being a link with Heaven. I'll be pleased to call you by your first name, Danny," she turned to him again, "and if there's anything you require I'm sure I'll be able to accommodate you. Goodnight for now." And she backed out of the door with her eyes practically masticating him.

"Well, Danny," I said, "you're away to a good start, anyway. Come and sit down."

He was near forty, small, but built to perfection. He had the blackest, curliest hair ever I seen, and eyes the colour of a wild cornflower. He was a pretty man right enough, and I didn't wonder at Widow Bundy going a wee bit slushy.

"How are you, boys," he said, gentle-like. "I'm glad to know you. My name's Danny Macbride and with the bit of knowledge I've picked up, I'll be looking after the small pumps on the job."

"I'm Riley," I said, "and these three are Brannigan, McGinty and Sullivan. The less I tell you about them the better it'll be for all concerned."

"Well now," said Danny looking round, "you seem pretty snug here all right, and the lady's cooking is a credit to her. I'll thank the Lord for a decent anchorage."

"Her cooking?" said Sullivan, suspicious. "Will you tell us what she give you?"

"I will. It was the best of bacon and eggs with fried potatoes. And with it, a dear little apology for a makeshift meal."

"The wicked woman!" said Brannigan.

"The old witch!" said McGinty.

"Hasn't she more faces than the town-hall clock?" asked Sullivan with a sob in his voice.

So I told Danny how it was and from the look that troubled his face I knew he was a man like us—he knew a decent plate when he saw one.

I needn't have worried. From that day on, may I never move again, the whole house changed. The next day being

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pay day, we made an earlier start and were on the job before the old woman was awake. But that night saw the commencement of it, and when the five of us sat down at the table I waited patiently for Ma Bundy to come in and prove every terrible thing I'd said about her grub.

She walked in with the greatest difficulty, carrying the largest dish of roast spuds ever I seen in England. Spuds that were fat, brown, hot and shiny. Then, with never a word, but a look at Danny that was eloquent, she darted out and brought in the meat: big, thick slices of beef, pink in the middle with crusty, roast edges. Onions next, the like of which I never tasted since: plump and glistening and sweet-looking. I'll never forget that meal.

None of us dared speak a word for fear of breaking the spell. Then we ate. Brannigan, always a two-handed fighter, stuffed it down like he was on piece-work; Sullivan didn't stop to chew; and Wee McGinty nearly had his feet in the plate.

There was enough and more and we sat back after thirty minutes of solid eating. McGinty was slumped in his chair like a drunk, Brannigan had a dazed look on his face and Sullivan couldn't even get up to his bed.

It was him who broke the silence. He let go a belch that rattled the windows and murmured, "A darling woman."

"She is that," agreed Brannigan sluggishly, "a saint of a woman."

"You pack of hypocrites," I said, "you know as well as me that only Danny here is responsible for all this. And what's more, if it lasts—*if*, mind you—he's the one to thank."

"Danny, I thank you from the very bottom of my stomach," said Sullivan.

"You've changed the face of the earth for us, Danny," said Brannigan, "and I'll flatten any man who gives you a wrong look."

They knew it better than me. With Danny's coming Widow Bundy was a changed woman. From that day she fed us like heavyweights, and all the time getting bolder and bolder to Danny until I wondered how she managed to keep her hands off the little fellow. The old cat was cooking herself silly just to see the smile of delight in his blue eyes and we all got the benefit.

Each day from her kitchen on the ground floor came a faint smell of cooking that was like a breath from Heaven. We'd get a whiff of crushed mint, or the sweet, gentle waft of simmering fruit. Now the meat came up in great gobbets or

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thick slices; she'd cream the spuds until they floated like puffy clouds of butter, and give us pie that was thick with apple and flecked with fat raisins. The old hag could certainly cook. We even got to a state where the five of us would set ourselves down of an evening and discuss the next day's grub like a bunch of earls.

"Well now," Sullivan would announce, "you can say what you like, but it's near time we had the old pig's head in the pot." Danny would nod, and sure as God next day we'd get a hunk of sweet-salt bacon nestling in a bed of tender, green cabbage and spuds like wee balls of flour.

I believe the English say something about "coming events cast their shadows before them." Three weeks after all this started we were nearly blotted out.

One night Danny said to me, "Shall I tell you something?"

"Do that, Danny," I said.

"Well, Widow Bundy wants to have a talk with me tonight down in her parlour."

Every mother's son of us knew what that meant.

"Good luck to you, Danny," said Brannigan warmly.

"More power to your elbow," said McGinty.

"—And the rest of you," said Sullivan.

"Now look, you bunch of pigs," I said when he'd gone, "there's a wee window over her room, and I think it's only right and proper that we keep a watching eye on the best friend we ever had..."

And that's how the four of us came to be standing on the tiny kitchen table looking in Widow Bundy's parlour through the window.

She was sat at one end of the sofa pretending to knit. Danny had perched himself at the other end—as far away as he could get. We couldn't hear a word, but sure we didn't have to. First, she says something to him and leers all over her face. Danny moves up the last remaining inch. Then she suddenly downs her knitting and slides up the sofa like greased lightning. Danny makes a last, despairing move but he never stood a chance. She gives a final wriggle like an old duck shaking water, and without further malarkey she has a grip on him like a half-nelson. He disappears slowly, with his poor hands clutching the sofa-back like a cliff-hanger dropping to his doom.

That was when Sullivan belched so loud we all fell off the table and ran upstairs like a flock of scalded hens.

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The next morning Danny looked at his breakfast, a wedge of flaky haddock with two poached eggs sitting on top as pretty as you like, and shook his head.

"Is there a day then, Danny?" I asked him.

"There's a day all right," he said wearily, "three weeks from next Saturday." And he got up and went out like a condemned man. And that's not a bad description either. I didn't know whether to be sad or sorry. The old widow had him lined up for marriage and poor Danny was like a mesmerised rabbit. But tell me now, what could I do? Nothing but eat, and we all did that.

Slowly, as the days went by, Danny became quieter and sadder, and each day Widow Bundy seemed to blossom—if you can imagine poison ivy in blossom. I never knew the time go by so quick and Danny said the same at least once a day.

Widow Bundy was still cooking like a woman demented and happy to do it, too. Great, rich pudding that would put a man to sleep quicker than a Mickey Finn, and soups that had the smell and taste of every vegetable that ever came out of God's green earth.

About three days before the wedding, and Lord knows that was going to be the biggest feed of all, Danny had to go on a trip with the foreman to get spares. With their destination being some miles away they went early and were staying overnight. Just before we knocked off the ganger called me over.

"Here," said this gorilla, "is a communication for Macbride, the wee fella that lives with you. Take a hold of it, and if he doesn't get it safe and sound I'll stuff your head in the concrete mixer."

Of all things it was a telegram. Terrible things, telegrams, you never know what's in them. So that night, after we'd eaten, I called on the doubtful intelligence of the other three. "Look," I said, "this telegram is for Danny—right? And Danny is the finest little fella that ever put one foot before the other—right?"

"—So we open it," said Brannigan, beating me to the punch.

"We do. There never was a time when I wouldn't do whatever I could to help the likes of a man like Danny."

"A man," said Brannigan, "the calibre of which—"

"Shut your face," I said, "and not a word of this to a living soul, understand?"

"As quiet as the grave, Riley," they promised, drooling. I opened it and stood reading the words over and over again.

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The next thing I knew Sullivan had it in his hand staring at it. God knows why—he can't even read the date.

"Will nobody tell me?" pleaded Wee McGinty.

"Sure, I'll tell you," I said, "Danny's a deep one all right. He's got a wife and five kids no less. And what's more they're coming here tomorrow from Ireland."

"You don't tell me?" McGinty was concussed.

"I do that. Listen to this: *Dear Danny. Why haven't you sent me any money this three week you blackguard. Am coming to see you on Friday if God spares me. From your loving wife Bridget and Shamus, Johnnie, Tommy, Michael and little Katie.*"

"Heaven help us," croaked Sullivan, and even his bald head went pale, "this'll ruin the whole business."

"We'll be worse off than when we started," said Brannigan. "I've no doubt Ma Bundy'll put the whole lot of us out whenever she hears of this."

"Shut your noise!" I bawled. "Maybe she'll never find out. Don't you see, we've got to make sure she doesn't hear tell of this at all? We'll get a hold of Danny's wife before she has a chance to get in here. God knows it should be easy enough to recognise that lot. We'll chase 'em down to the Salvation Army hostel, then tell Danny on the quiet. He'll know what to do—I hope. Ah, to think this could happen to us when we've got another six months' work and the best food that's cooked!"

That's the way we planned it, just as easy as eating one of Widow Bundy's pies. But how daft I was, with the whole day open to Danny's wife and us not finishing work until six.

As we turned the corner next evening it was just in time to see a barn of a woman going into the house with what looked like an orphans' outing trailing after her.

"Look!" I howled, "we've missed her!" And I tore into the house like a rent-collector.

There were the two women, standing like old warriors. The five kids were crawling over the kitchen like locusts, with Katie, the little one, squatting behind a chair quietly disembowelling the cat.

"Ha, ladies!" I said, full of good humour, "good evening to you both. Missus," I said to the big one, "would you step outside for a minute and give me the pleasure of a word?"

"I will not!" she said, looking me up and down and bristling like a hedgehog. "I want nothing but me man Danny and I'll have him if it's the last thing I do."

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Widow Bundy tottered back as though she had taken a blow in the face. "*Your* Danny?"

"Certainly my Danny. He's the blackest-hearted scoundrel that ever drew breath, but sure isn't he the father of me five children? And where is he?"

"Ah, he'll be back, ma'am," said McGinty, as large as life.

"Shut your face, McGinty," I said, "and you, ma'am, take no notice of him. McGinty was ever a stranger to the truth, and between the two of us the good Lord never burdened him with a brain. Now if you'll just—"

At that very moment the door opened and in walked Danny.

I just gave up, but credit where it's due, Widow Bundy was powerful quick off the mark: "Well Danny, you've arrived just in time. You see who's here and we might as well decide this now. I forgive you for not telling me, but now you must give a straight answer. Who's it to be—her or me? And there's pork chop and peas in the oven," she added.

Danny looked from one to the other and down at the screaming kids.

"For God's sake, woman," he shouted above the din and as crotchety as ever I seen him, "what in the world are you blathering about?"

"Why Danny, isn't this your wife?"

"Him?" yelled the big woman, "him me husband? He is not. And what's more I'll have you know my Danny's six-foot-three in his naked feet!"

Widow Bundy's face lit up like a beacon. "Oh, well, won't you have a cup of tea, Mrs.—er—Macbride?"

"I'll take no tea. All I want is me Danny. I been to see the Company and the Company says he lives here."

"Look now," said Danny wearily, "will you all hold your tongues? I know what it is and the explanation is very simple. There's another Danny Macbride on the Company. Wasn't I sent down here partly because they were for ever mixing us up? Now they've done it again. Look, ma'am, go back to the Company and tell them. They'll put you right."

He gave another long, sad look at us. "Now I want to hear no more. I'm tired and I'm going to bed." And he went.

Big Mother Macbride looked as though she'd walked into an asylum, and I knew for sure she was trying to think of some excuse for hitting somebody. But she finally cuffed-up her brood and disappeared out the front door.

"Do you think," said Widow Bundy, "I should call Danny for his meal?" Now she was all smiles.

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"That I wouldn't do," said Sullivan, and I wondered at his good sense, till I realised he had his eye on Danny's chop. So we let things be, had our meal and went to bed.

Danny was lying there with his back to us and I threatened the others with scalping if they even coughed. I tiptoed over and looked at him, fast asleep and looking like a cherub. Sure, I'm glad I took that look at him when I did, for that was the last time I ever laid eyes on him. He must've gone some time during the night with never a sound. Not that noise would've mattered for the four of us slept like corpses.

What happened to him? Well, I heard tell he got a job on the smallest boat on the ocean going to the farthest port in the world.

So he missed the wedding and a fine barney it was, too. He would have enjoyed every minute of it. Sometimes—only sometimes, mind you—I wish I'd never married her. Like today, when I took a turn down the road and weighed meself. Sure, eighteen stone's too heavy for any man, don't you think?

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ANSWERS TO THE RACING QUIZ ON PAGE 108

1. 1st January of the year in which it is born.
2. Bruce Hobbs was 17 in 1938, riding "Battleship".
3. Twice. He was placed third to "Mill House" and "Happy Spring" at Newbury in the Hennessy Gold Cup, 1963/4 season, and third again to "Flying Wild" and "Buonette" at Cheltenham in the Massey-Ferguson Gold Cup, 1964/5 season.
4. The Beacon course, Newmarket—4 miles, 397 yards.
5. 1909: H. Jones rode King Edward VII's "Minoru".
6. (a) Fairyhouse, (b) at Bogside until 1965, now at Ayr, (c) Chepstow.
7. To the left.
8. Kitchener weighed 3 st. 7 lbs. when he won the Chester Cup on "Red Deer" in 1844.
9. Yes: the Newmarket Town Plate, run over 4 miles.
10. Queen Anne—Royal Ascot was opened in 1711.
11. A horse has been timed at 42 mph, 6 mph faster than a greyhound.
12. Only once, on "Pinza" in 1953.
13. It was founded in 1750—216 years ago.
14. Purple, gold braid, scarlet sleeves, black velvet cap with gold fringe.
15. Joe Mercer, riding "Grey of Falloden".

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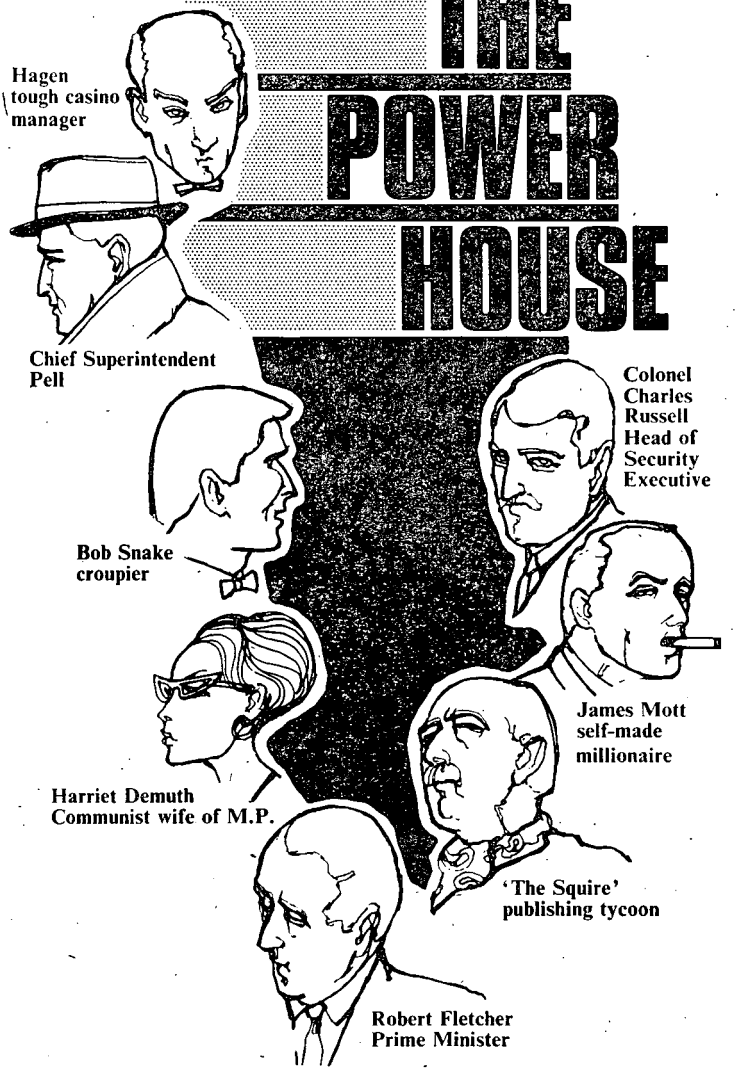
THE POWER HOUSE



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William Haggard

Beginning a new serial by one of Britain's most polished thriller writers. Sinister intrigues involving the worlds of politics and big-time gambling are a new challenge for Colonel Russell of Security Executive

THE Prime Minister was worried. Privately, he would have resented the word, since his reputation was one of a matchless professionalism. Nevertheless, the fact remained—Robert Fletcher was worried about Victor Demuth.

Mr. Victor Demuth was a Member of Parliament, balanced somewhat precariously on an extreme wing of a Government back bench. He was a professional protester, and had five thousand a year unearned. Also, he edited *The Podium*. Victor Demuth was about to attend some crackpot international conference—The Peoples' Convention against Neo-Colonialism —in a certain country whose friendly intentions towards Great Britain were, at the moment, more than suspect.

Was Demuth intending to defect?

It was not that he was likely to spill secrets; he had no secrets to spill. And he would suffer in the end, of course. They'd kill the fatted calf for perhaps six weeks and then, when they'd sucked his usefulness, they'd find him some job in a single room with barely enough to live on. Soon he would go to pieces and quite shortly he would die. But before that, he would be a nine days' wonder—an English Member of Parliament screaming treasonable nonsense east of the Iron Curtain.

The Prime Minister would have sold his firstborn to keep Victor Demuth in England, but he didn't see how to do it. The normal techniques—subtle bribery, coercion—would be useless. The causes Demuth fought for were irrelevant by now, rather than lost, but the man was honest in his way, a

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respectable old survival with an unambiguous sense of right and wrong. Could he be offered a minor office? There'd be an immediate storm, quite possibly resignations among the faithful. Have him in and talk to him—talk about solidarity, the party? He'd publish it in that rag of his, something just short of actionable since he had lawyers of notable competence. It could all be denied and of course it would be, but the damage would have been done. Nobody read *The Podium*, or nobody who mattered, but the Prime Minister couldn't reasonably expect that Her Majesty's Opposition would let it ride. They'd be on to it like a knife.

The Executive might help him: its wings were unclipped since no sensible Minister wanted to clip them. But flat instructions were unthinkable, so it was a question of making contact. The right sort of contact, made rightly...

Robert Fletcher began to consider the possibilities. Tell his secretary to fish about? For the first time he laughed. His Principal Private Secretary was on loan from the Foreign Office and the Prime Minister valued him at zero. Ask him to contact the Executive and at once he'd start to bristle. The Foreign Office hated the Executive, since more than once they'd been humiliated. To the Foreign Office, men like Colonel Charles Russell, Head of the Security Executive, were a necessary evil who should be kept in their place by unequivocal orders unequivocally delivered. This roundabout way of doing things... Besides, there'd be nothing in it, nothing for the PPS. No premature knighthood, no job in the City.

Then what about his cronies, the men he used when there was anything somewhat delicate? What about Jim Mott?

Robert Fletcher weighed the pros and cons. There'd been that article in *The Podium*. Mott hadn't been mentioned by name, since that was libel, but everybody had known who was intended. Mott had been laughed at, ridiculed—his clothes, the horses he kept for the entirely unsnobbish reason that he liked horses, his sexual habits which were robustly orthodox, a certain lack of the social graces. Demuth had always hated Mott, a self-made man who had lived dangerously, made money, and was contemptuously indifferent to the principles Victor Demuth held sacred. As for Jim Mott, he despised Demuth, classing him as a clown, a political dilettante, who, if he hadn't had private means, would have been a clerk. No, he wouldn't have forgotten the article. Mention Victor Demuth and Mott might simply close up. On the other hand, he was absurdly loyal. That was the word—absurdly. The

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Prime Minister's conscience wasn't at ease about James Mott.

What was Mott really playing for? They'd come a long way together in their different ways, yet Mott had asked nothing, never a thing. That was odd, outside experience, and Robert Fletcher had enough of it to feel uneasy with the unusual. They were men from the same background, one fighting his way up the ladder of politics, the other intent on money. The Prime Minister had been far too fly to take money from Mott—he'd never in fact been offered cash—but there'd been a dozen ways in which a man growing richer had helped a young Member. And he'd never asked a favour back—not one.

Fletcher shrugged. If he sent for James Mott it would be another little entry in a ledger already topheavy. Against that, he knew no-one better. James Mott was tough, and so, behind the deceptive gloss, was Charles Russell. They were very different animals, but it was certain they'd respect each other. The Prime Minister picked up the telephone and called James Mott. He'd be grateful for a chat with him, and please make it quickly.

As for the obligation, he could always wriggle out of it. He'd got where he was by wriggling.

GINA DEMUTH was driving with her father to the airport. He should have left the night before, but the February fog had stopped the flight. Now his schedule was tight and he was showing it in his driving. There was fog again, not so much, but more than enough to go carefully. Gina Demuth thought her father drove abominably.

She looked at him sideways. If he didn't watch out he'd kill them both, for he thought he drove much better than he did. She shouldn't really have been with him, but her stepmother, Harriet, had some meeting. Gina detested Harriet—part instinct, part analysis. Victor had met her at some conference. She was far too young, for one thing—barely older than Gina—and she was typical of the sleazy world which exploited Demuth and, behind his back, laughed at him. She had harlequin glasses and extremist political slogans poured from her unremittingly. Gina had stood the new *ménage* for a month and then fled to a bed-sitter in the Fulham Road. She'd been equipped to earn her living as a competent working journalist, and she'd be marrying Bob Snake, a croupier at Stacks, when he'd saved the price of a flat.

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A lorry came by in the outside lane, fast but perfectly safely, and Victor Demuth swore at it. He drove, as he lived, with an unconscious arrogance, certain beyond questioning that his own way was right. As a driver, it certainly wasn't. He was cautious when it was unnecessary, irritably reckless when the sensible man went cautiously.

He pulled out unexpectedly and Gina gasped. The fog was patchy now and treacherous, stretches almost clear of it, then without warning dense again. Victor Demuth had overtaken into a fog patch. At once he near-panicked, braking without warning, pulling back too suddenly into the nearside lane. There was a shrill of brakes behind them and a protesting horn. Gina looked back. The fickle fog had thinned again and she could make out an elderly Rover. A young man was driving it—not the typical Rover driver. He had a sheepskin coat and an untidy beard. When he saw Gina looking, he shook his fist. There was a girl beside him and she put out her tongue. Gina blushed unhappily.

Her father was driving slowly now, shaken and careful. Too careful—she knew the signs. The Rover flashed them and overtook. All perfectly correct, she thought. Her father did not; he said angrily, "The hogs." It didn't seem to occur to him that he'd nearly caused an accident.

Gina was taut, but she made herself speak casually, "We're nearly at the turning now."

The fog was closing in again, the Rover in front of them almost invisible. Its tail lights were showing, then suddenly were lost again. They turned left from the motorway, down the incline of the airport road. She thought about the roundabout—go left and she could breathe again. She'd been here in fog before and knew the drill. There'd be men in white coats with lanterns, the streams of traffic marshalled.

Her father said unexpectedly, "I wish I could *see*."

"Go slow, keep left. Oh God—"

She clutched her seat. It was the Rover again and Demuth simply hadn't seen it. It was flashing for right-turn and the driver had his arm out to make sure. A collision wasn't inevitable—a firm pressure on the brakes, but not too firm, a cool turn of the wheel to the left...

Victor Demuth banged his foot down hard, spinning the wheel furiously. The rear tyres broke on the greasy road, the car sliding stupidly through a hundred and eighty degrees. Once skidding, it crabbed on helplessly, cracking the Rover's backside with its own. It hadn't been severe, but it had slewed

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the Rover round. It was halted across the outside lane, blocked by a fence in front, Demuth behind.

Demuth was breathing fast, but he didn't swear. For an instant nothing happened. Then Gina, facing the way they'd come, saw powerful headlights. They seemed to be slowing, but not enough. There was a crash, a silence.

She followed her father unsteadily from the car. The Rover had keeled over. The man was inside still, but the girl was half out, her little tart's face contorted. She said weakly: "Please help me. Please."

Two men from the third car had taken her by the armpits. They pulled and she screamed. The men stopped pulling, looking around uncertainly.

There was a sudden explosion, no more than a champagne cork, but in a second the Rover was an inferno. They all stepped back instinctively.

One of the men said: "Extinguisher," and ran to his car.

"Father—Daddy—do something!"

Victor Demuth didn't move.

The other man moved forward and for twenty seconds Gina lost him. When he emerged his face was flayed, his leather gloves smouldering. Through what was left of his face he said: "No go."

The other man came back again and Gina helped him with the extinguisher. There wasn't, she knew, the slightest hope.

When it was over she moved to the nearside lane. Gina Demuth was comprehensively sick.

COLONEL Charles Russell's secretary came in quietly. "There's a Mr. James Mott to see you, sir."

"Who hasn't an appointment," Russell said. This morning, for once, was clear.

"He said he'd been sent, but he wouldn't say who sent him."

Charles Russell considered. He'd heard of James Mott, though not officially. The Security Executive had the second-best information west of the Iron Curtain, but it didn't include a dossier on James Mott. There wasn't any reason why it should. The James Motts of the world weren't material for the Executive, though half a mile away from it, in headquarters just as famous, Russell wouldn't have been surprised to find a considerable fat file on him. Mott was rich and he'd come from nothing, and few men did that without making enemies.

"Show him straight in, please."

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Russell moved to his desk and his secretary put Mott into the padded chair which faced it. Through the courtesies Russell watched Mott. He looked heavy beside Russell, but he wasn't yet fat and he was dressed expensively but soberly. He had neat dark hair flecked with grey above the temples and he'd shaved, or been shaved, with care. His ringless hands were large and still muscular. He spoke in the classless with-it voice which Russell knew cost money from the best of elocutionists . . . So this was the modern richie, the progressive millionaire, the new, new man.

James Mott said quietly, "The Prime Minister asked me to call on you."

Russell wasn't incredulous. He hadn't papers on Mott, but he did have the knowledge of the man who moved around. Mott was useful to his party. It could do no harm to listen.

Mott was talking again in his pleasant voice. "I was going to try to contact you yesterday afternoon. But as it's happened, that isn't necessary. Congratulations."

"Thank you. On what?"

Mott looked at Russell respectfully—this wasn't a man to spread his hand prematurely. He said, "You'll have heard of Victor Demuth—I dare say you know much more of him than I do." Russell didn't comment and Mott went on. "Well, this conference he was going to couldn't be timed more awkwardly—"

"And where do I come into this?"

"You don't—not now. Demuth isn't going."

Charles Russell sat expressionless . . . So Mott had meant to come to him with a request he'd received before: stop somebody from going somewhere. He said formally, "Let's get this in words, at least. You intended to come to me yesterday to ask me to stop Victor Demuth from leaving?"

Russell's voice had an edge, but Jim Mott turned it neatly. "We needn't go into the past, that's dead. Demuth missed his plane and there isn't another that would get him there on schedule. He was slated as the high spot of this half-witted conference and I don't think he would go creeping in as a sort of second billing. Congratulations again."

Charles Russell didn't answer. He had read about the accident in an evening paper the night before, and so no doubt had Mott, who was sophisticated—too sophisticated, clearly, where the Executive was concerned. He'd at once assumed that Russell had played a hand of his own, quietly fixing an accident before he'd even been asked to act. The assumption

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wasn't stupid, but Charles Russell suppressed a tiny snort. Congratulations indeed! It was something less than flattering to be assumed to have bungled a simple job. When the Executive fixed a car crash it could do so short of burning its two operators to death. He said, blandly, "I think I've followed your train of thought—you won't expect me to comment." Then his voice changed. "But Demuth, you said, isn't going now, so why have you come to me?"

"I said that he wouldn't be going to *this* conference."

"Implying he might be going still? Later? But why?"

Mott reflected. Russell approved it. He'd asked an awkward question and would have mistrusted a too-quick answer.

Mott said at length, "I'm going to tell you something which I haven't told anyone else." It was true, he was thinking. He hadn't told Robert Fletcher that Demuth was a potential defector. He hadn't because he couldn't. The Prime Minister would have pressed him, insisting he give his sources. He had only Bob Snake and he liked Bob Snake. He liked him too much to risk involving him in trouble.

Charles Russell was saying, "Indeed?"

"I mean that I haven't told Fletcher what I think I must tell you. I've nothing to go on but hearsay."

"Which is mostly uninformed but sometimes isn't."

"I've a friend who's pretty close to Demuth, he's going to marry Demuth's daughter. Demuth's got him properly worried." James Mott paused. "My friend thinks Demuth might defect," he said.

"Like you-know-who?"

"Not like the you-know-whos at all. The you-know-whos had secrets, or at least they had information. The only thing that Victor's got is the fact that he's a Member."

"Awkward enough," Charles Russell said.

"You can see how they'd use it?"

"I can." There was a silence while Charles Russell thought.

James Mott was doing some thinking, too. How much, he wondered, did Russell know? He'd know about Demuth, of course—it was his business to know the Victor Demuths—but how much would he know of Mott's own position? He would know that the Prime Minister often used him as a contact man, but it was unlikely he read *The Podium*. James Mott smiled faintly. If he'd put his inclination first, then he wouldn't have come to Charles Russell at all . . . Stop Demuth playing traitor? Why, certainly—a duty. Stop Demuth dying miserably—that wasn't so acceptable. But James Mott was doing his duty.

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He had a lively sense of humour and the irony consoled him. He was asking Charles Russell to save Victor from a shoddy death. Personally, he felt cheated, but he wasn't acting personally.

Charles Russell emerged from his considerable silence. "Well then, that deals with this conference, but not with the future." Russell frowned, choosing words. "If he tries to leave again, without a conference, I mean, without good and apparent reason . . ."

His voice tailed away but Mott finished the sentence: ". . . Then on the face of it, he's defecting."

"It's at least a possibility, if your informant was correct. And it's a possibility we can't accept." Russell smiled without amusement. "Defection," he said, "brings me into this officially. Now I'd like you to listen."

He picked up a telephone, giving clear and careful orders. The head of the Executive was interested in Victor Demuth. Not in his private life, his views; he was interested in the possibility that he might attempt to leave the country. Any step in that direction was to be reported, but Demuth was a Member and that spoke for itself. And there was something called Privilege, over-dear to the Mother of Parliaments. So this was a matter for the utmost discretion, the very best men available. Russell was to be kept informed. At all places, at all times.

He returned to James Mott. "I hope we're both wrong." At the door he shook hands firmly, then sat down.

He'd liked Jim Mott and respected him, too. He'd liked his shrewdness, he'd liked his sense. There weren't many like him in politics now, and such as there were fought shy of Robert Fletcher.

Russell sent for the file on Demuth. It made depressing reading and Russell read it with depression. For here was a man with most things—intelligence certainly, more than enough money for a headstart, even determination, if that wasn't too large a label for what enemies would call obstinacy. Equipped to compete at any level he'd cared to aim at, Demuth had flinched instead from conflict. Failure would have been intolerable. Instead, he had slipped into the security of protest. There he was king—admired, adored, above all things, king unchallenged. His wife was an active Communist, and he kept himself sane on sleeping pills.

Russell put the file away, then sent for his chief assistant.

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Presently he came in, a quiet man, calculatedly unnoticeable. Robert Mortimer was conventional, a paragon of correctitude. In his heart Russell pitied him but didn't actively like him. He valued Mortimer and respected him, their relationship was fruitful, but he wouldn't have chosen Mortimer for an evening with his slippers off. He explained now, shortly, that he had put a tail on Victor Demuth, the tail's duties being limited to reporting any air-booking which Victor Demuth might make.

Mortimer nodded. "Of course, he's a Member of Parliament—"

"I've just been re-reading his file. I think I'd like to meet him. No, I don't mean really meet him—I'd probably lose my temper. But I would like to see him, preferably in action." Russell paused, then said, "You do know about the latest development?"

"Of course. Demuth should have caught a plane last night, but instead he had an accident. It's been in all the papers and it seems it *was* an accident. Odd, though. Coincidence—"

Russell interrupted: "At least one highly-connected person doesn't think so—he thinks we fixed it. We'll talk about that later, though. Could we find out now how Demuth plans to spend his evening?"

"May I use your telephone?"

"You may."

After his third phone call, Mortimer looked pleased. "My man can't be certain, but he does have a line. Demuth belongs to something called the Ananda Society. They've a meeting tonight at the Halfwits' Hall."

"I know where you mean."

"He'd almost certainly have been there if he hadn't intended to catch that plane."

"It's well worth a try. What time?"

"Eight o'clock."

"Most uncivilised, but I'll make it."

"Would you like me to come too, sir?"

"No."

"Thank you very much, sir."

Mortimer left composedly and Russell telephoned to his housekeeper. She was to give him soup and cheese at seven o'clock and to call the usual taxi rank for a cab at a quarter to eight.

The squalid little hall was almost entirely empty when Russell got there, but a young man at the door was collecting

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shillings. Russell said politely, "Starting a little late tonight?"

"The Master's been delayed, you know."

"The Master?"

"Shri Shanker."

Russell didn't comment, for none was necessary. He'd never yet met a punctual Indian. The little hall was uninviting, the chairs small and uncomfortable, the paper peeling from the dirty walls. Over the platform hung two naked bulbs on dusty flex. Russell shivered, but not with cold. "Do you know where people wait?"

"There's The Bear round the corner—quite a few have gone there. I'll call them when the Master comes."

"Is he speaking tonight?"

"We're waiting."

Russell said innocently, "Anybody else?"

"There's Victor Demuth, he can come after all."

"Then I think I'll try The Bear meanwhile."

Russell walked to The Bear, pushing open a door marked SNUG. After the hall, it was a haven of sanity. Comfortable-looking women were drinking stout, their men mostly whisky. All were watching the television in total silence, or rather it was silence till it was barbarously interrupted. A guitar struck up in the public bar, but a shout at once drowned it: *"Stop the white racialists!"*

Russell's neighbour said crossly: "The bastards."

"What's going on?"

"It's those so-and-sos from the hall. They come here once a fortnight and they always spoil the evening."

Russell rose without haste—it would be interesting to see who was there. But his neighbour pulled him gently down.

"I wouldn't go in there if I was you."

"But they're not going to kill me!"

"I didn't say they were. But you've a nice clean collar and I can see you shaved this morning. They're going to be very rude to you."

"I'm used to that." Russell began to rise again. But he was intercepted this time by a young man he knew well.

Bob Snake said politely, "Good evening, Uncle."

"Good evening, Bob."

Snake wasn't Russell's nephew, but his first cousin once removed. The "uncle" was honorary but by no means misplaced, for out of all the young of the Russell clan Snake was easily Russell's favourite.

Snake worked mostly at nights, sleeping in the mornings, but

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it didn't yet show on him. He had sharp blue eyes, solid-looking shoulders, and no stomach at all, and he wore narrow sea-cook's trousers and a sports coat with the natural elegance of a man who bought good clothes and then forgot them. He was an Irishman with a tradition of Spanish blood from some shipwrecked Armada sailor. His real name was Robert Ignatius Serpent, but inevitably he'd been Bob Snake since he could remember. With a varied crop of wild oats behind him, he had settled at last to a steady job. James Mott had befriended him and he was a croupier at Stacks club, a good one, working regularly and saving money. Also, there was Gina Demuth. He intended to marry her when Demuth relaxed his disapproval.

Russell said, "And what brings you here in working hours?"

"I might ask you the same, less the working hours."

"I'm waiting till the meeting starts. I came to hear Victor Demuth."

"And so did I."

"But why?"

Bob Snake said softly, sideways, "Victor scares me to death. And now that I've seen you here, I'm more terrified than ever."

Russell took an immediate decision. He had already got his background—the peculiar smell of this peculiar world: it would hardly be sharpened by listening to an Indian, a probable hotch-potch of every vanity for centuries, nor even by hearing Demuth himself. He said casually, "What are you drinking?"

"Whisky, please." The noise from the public bar was less now, but it wasn't yet quite silent. Snake nodded at the partition. "I think they'll be starting the meeting soon."

"But I don't think I'll be going now. I'd rather have a word with you."

Russell knew all about Bob Serpent, alias Snake; he knew he was going steady with Gina Demuth and that Victor Demuth had objected strongly. Naturally Demuth would oppose Bob Snake—Snake was totally wrong as a son-in-law to Victor. He was making good money but he made it as a croupier. And Snake wasn't an intellectual; he followed cricket and racing and he never read *The Podium*. Russell looked at him with affection. "Do you mind if I ask you questions?"

"No."

"You know Mott, don't you?" Russell asked.

"I know him very well indeed. He's been kind to me more than once."

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"When you came out of Borstal?"

"Yes."

Russell was silent. Events were a little clearer. Snake had had his share of trouble, now he wanted to settle down: the last thing he'd welcome would be a scandal round Gina's head. So Snake had gone to Mott and Mott, for another reason, had been sent for by the Prime Minister. Then Mott had come round to the Security Executive... Charles Russell asked quietly: "What exactly do you fear, Bob?"

"That if Victor goes east of the Curtain he'll simply stay there."

"You put it like that to Mott?"

"I did."

"Can you keep your mouth shut, Bob?"

"I've learned that the hard way."

"Then will you?"

"Yes."

Russell said deliberately: "In the next ten days there are thirty-three flights to where Victor was going. That's all services, all lines. And Victor's booked on none of them."

"Thanks a lot, Uncle. Then it looks all right?"

"Let's say it looks better," Charles Russell said.

He had seldom been more mistaken.

AFTER the accident, Harriet Demuth gave her husband twenty-four hours, then went to work on him smoothly. Victor knew that his wife was a Communist, but not where she stood in Communism. She wasn't a card-carrier, card-carriers were stooges, but a high-ranking senior in the power behind the legal front. She'd married him because she'd been ordered to, since Victor was a Member and there were possibilities in a Member. By now she despised him utterly, but she'd learnt a certain pity, too. It in no way impeded her when she began to put Victor through it: this was an opportunity—for all she knew the best one. If Victor went behind the Curtain he might be valuable: not if he went to attend some idiot conference—he could always return from a conference—but if he went voluntarily and stayed there. A British MP defecting! He wouldn't live long, she was certain of that, but for six months at least his potential would be considerable.

On his return from the Ananda Society therefore, she told him the police had been and would call again tomorrow. About that accident, of course.

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Victor said he could handle the police. He'd given a first statement and he'd been to his solicitor.

But she saw at once she'd troubled him, the knife had begun to turn. She turned it deftly a little more. In a concerned sort of voice, the perfect wife, she said something about two teenagers. They'd burned to death, and horribly. Naturally the police must take that seriously. Victor wasn't a nobody, he was a public figure . . .

Then what was she suggesting?

Nothing. It had simply occurred to her that if one could go away for a bit, let it blow over . . .

Victor said it was impossible, but she saw that the seed had taken root.

She watered it promptly. Hadn't it been rather an odd sort of accident?

What did she mean? Was she suggesting that it had really been his fault?

No, no. Of course he drove beautifully (like Gina, she thought him dangerous), but there *had* been fog and there *hadn't* been other witnesses . . . She had friends who could arrange things.

Impossible. Unthinkable.

Now the pressure went on seriously. But it *had* been a curious accident. Try to look at it *politically*. He had a certain reputation, he'd made enemies by the hundred. Even to his nominal friends he was often an embarrassment. And he'd been going to a conference they could hardly have approved of. She stopped and watched him.

Go on.

No, it was better that *he* went on. He had a much better brain than she had.

Victor said finally, shakily but pompous still, "If I'm understanding you correctly, you're suggesting it wasn't an accident. You're suggesting that somebody crashed me to stop my leaving."

Well, there was always the secret police, that dreadful Security Executive. He'd said himself a dozen times that the Executive was a menace. *Their next move might be even worse.*

"I simply don't believe it."

She saw he half did. He was as vain as they all were, vain and a little flattered. He was frightened, too—she had him now.

"I could fix your going away, you know."

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He didn't answer but poured whisky, drinking it neat and much too fast.

"Don't decide now, dear—let's go to bed. We'll talk where it's warm, decide . . ."

"All right."

She took him to bed and in an hour he was compliant.

When he was asleep she took a bath. Then she went downstairs to telephone. She made her arrangements quickly; giving orders, not receiving them. At the end a voice said respectfully: "Well done."

Gina had been surprised by her father's invitation to supper. She hadn't been back to the house in Hampstead since she'd been driven from it by Harriet. She saw at once that it hadn't been changed much. Harriet (who was away, her father explained) evidently wasn't interested in the domesticities.

But if the house hadn't changed much, her father had: he seemed tensed to breaking-point. Supper wasn't a success. Victor was drinking heavily, and Gina hoped devoutly that he wasn't on the pills as well. Victor, in stress, hit the pill bottle hard. Once he'd nearly died of them. This evening he'd been on a knife edge, reacting incomprehensibly when she'd suggested she should stay the night. A fog had come down again, Fulham was a long, long way, and in her small and decrepit runabout she simply hadn't fancied the drive. Her father had looked frustrated, anxious to act decisively but unable to face decision. He had wasted half an hour in telephoning taxi ranks for her. He hadn't been able to get one, for the fog by now was as thick as soup.

She went to her old room at last. The bed was made up, but the sheets unaired. She went to bed and somehow slept.

She woke in the small hours at the crash on the stairs. There was an oath, then something falling. It didn't sound like a body, but harder and more solid. It went on falling, bumping down, and her father went on swearing. He had tripped and dropped his suitcase.

Gina flew to the stair-head. If he'd been at those pills again after drinking all that whisky . . .

The stairs were empty, the street door shut. The light above it was burning still.

She ran to his room—a shambles. Clothes were everywhere, a discarded Gladstone bag on the rumpled bed. In the bathroom, his razors were gone.

She went to the window, jerking back the curtains. There

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was a big black saloon outside and, as she watched, it began to move away. It moved smoothly down the street, accelerating; it swung to the right; was gone.

Gina sat down on the littered bed, making herself count twenty. Then she telephoned Bob Snake.

He was silent for some time and at last she had to prompt him. "Bob—"

"Yes, I'm here still." He thought again and Gina waited. Finally he said crisply, "Was anybody there in the house besides the two of you?"

"No. Supper was cold."

"That's good. Bring your car to me here—it's cleared enough to drive it. I'll take you on."

"Where to?"

"We'll have to go to the Security Executive."

"Bob... But the Security Executive..." Gina had heard of it, Gina was frightened.

She heard a chuckle, faint, but it reassured her.

"Don't worry, I've got an uncle there."

IT was three in the morning, and Snake took Gina not to the Executive but to Charles Russell's unfashionably-sited flat.

Russell received them in a dressing-gown, but he was alert and bright-eyed and listened to Gina carefully, giving her high marks. She'd been shaken, he saw, but she was talking almost composedly; she'd considered the facts and was laying them out in order. He listened until she had finished, then nodded approvingly. "And that's all you know?"

"I'm afraid it is."

"Your father said nothing about going away?"

"No, nothing to me."

"And you'd never seen this car before?"

Gina shook her head and Russell rose. He went to two telephones and began to use both of them, ringing directly to the homes of the people concerned. When it was urgent, he respected no man's privacy. That was a condition of service in the Executive, one unquestioningly accepted.

There were at least a dozen small airfields from which a light aircraft could reach the Continent. There wasn't, in fact, much hope of an interception. Nevertheless, what could be done, should be... Yes, previous instructions were cancelled. Demuth was a Member, but that was unimportant now. Limitations were lifted. And Mrs. Demuth? It was odds

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she'd gone already, probably directed to another destination, but of course that should be checked as well.

Russell then moved to a third telephone, ringing to Number Ten. It was the responsibility of the Secretaries to decide whether Fletcher be woken. He had gone to his constituency? Then Russell suggested that he be brought back rather quickly. And he'd be putting it all in writing in the morning.

Gina said, "And what do we do now, please?"

"Nothing, for the moment—I've done everything possible, which amounts to precisely nothing if he's going where we suspect. Go to work normally. Wait." He smiled again. "I know it's the hardest thing to do. And, of course, talk to no-one."

"We won't."

He saw them out and went back to bed. In ten minutes he was asleep again.

He woke at seven, his normal time, and bathed and shaved unhurriedly. Then he walked to the Executive, wished his secretary good morning, and began to write a report for Number Ten. He'd be sent for in time, or perhaps he wouldn't. Perhaps it would be a go-between, perhaps Jim Mott again. Yes, that might be convenient—Robert Fletcher's sort of convenience. Like most senior officials, Charles Russell had met Fletcher several times. He'd admired his techniques, his political skill, but he wouldn't have trusted him...

It occurred to Russell that he knew nothing of Jim Mott. Without bothering to telephone for an appointment, he went to see Chief Superintendent Harold Pell, and was received at once. His relations with Pell were excellent, far beyond the need for protocol. The frontier between their empires was often vague —vague, but observed meticulously. They liked each other personally.

"Good morning, Harold."

"Good morning, sir."

Chief Superintendent Pell called Russell "sir" just twice in every interview, once when it started and once at the end. It precisely defined a friendship which both enjoyed and valued. Pell was a man in his late fifties, tall, dressed in immaculate mufti. He had a long lean face and the actor's mobile mouth —in private life he was an amateur actor of distinction. He looked like a horse, an intelligent and slightly sardonic horse. He said now amiably, "What can I do for you?"

"What do you know of a man called Mott?"

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"Jim Mott? Plenty. I'll send for the file."

It arrived in three minutes and was several inches thick. When Russell flinched, Pell laughed. "There's a summary on the left-hand side—two sheets of foolscap."

Russell read it with interest and a proper humility, for this was a world he knew nothing about. It had begun on the battlefields. When the fighting was over, but not before, Sergeant Mott had discharged himself without waiting for the formalities, and fourteen months later he'd been worth two hundred thousand . . . Scrap! Other fortunes had been made from it and most of them lost as quickly, but Mott had held on to his first big money. Not without difficulty. Two hundred thousand pounds in a belt unaccustomed to money had been a target for every shark alive. A sergeant with two hundred thou—it was almost a social duty to relieve him of it promptly.

Mott had fought back and he'd fought with his natural weapons against enemies more sophisticated. Twice he had nearly gone to jail, but Russell read on impassively. If they'd jailed him it would have been legal—judge and jury, the lot—but it would hardly have been justice, or not Russell's idea of what was just. He'd liked Jim Mott and now he was admiring him. He put the file down finally, turning to Harold Pell: "Quite a man," he said, respectfully.

"The Belgians still think so. They'd arrest him tomorrow if he tried to set foot in Belgium."

"Extradition?"

"I believe they once thought of it. Not a hope of it now, though."

Russell said, "Have you ever heard of a nephew of mine—Robert Serpent, alias Snake?"

"I don't think I have."

"Not even in Borstal?"

"A Russell in Borstal?"

"There were seven of them at Waterloo."

Harold Pell laughed. "I think I take the point," he said.

"I mention him since he's a friend of Mott. I never quite knew how they'd met before, but now I can make a guess at it. My nephew was a wild one and Mott must have used him, perhaps more than once. He's stood by him, too; he's now found him a job as a croupier at Stacks." Russell's voice changed. "But I didn't know Mott owned Stacks."

"Few people do. He has a second casino in London, three in the provinces, a couple in the stockbroker belt of Surrey.

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And one on the Continent if I'm not misinformed." The Chief Superintendent smiled again. "We call it the Red Chain."

"Implying there's another?" asked Russell.

"Yes, the Blue."

"Oh," said Russell. "And who owns the Blue?"

"A man they call the Squire."

"Presumably because he's not."

"On the contrary," smiled Pell.

"The usual surtax farmer then?"

"Not at all. He has eight thousand acres in darkest Norfolk and they've been in his family for centuries. Malting barley and sugar beet," Pell added unexpectedly.

"A rum one to own casinos."

"Which hardly go well with a large estate, magazines and a newspaper—*The Freeman*? But he doesn't own them openly," Pell continued, "any more than Mott owns his. Officially, it's a company, and if you're interested in who holds the shares I'll save you another question. They're in the names of the nominees of the stuffiest of merchant banks. And that's pretty damned stuffy." The Chief Superintendent had been enjoying himself: a little mystery wasn't distasteful. "And now you'll want to know the real name."

"I rather think you've told me." Russell picked up the file again, re-reading a couple of paragraphs. Mott's casinos were respectable: if you had to find easy words for them they'd be cosy and maybe popular. You could lose your money decently. He said, fishing, "You've given Mott's places a pretty clean bill."

"And you're asking about the others? Well..." Harold Pell said slowly, "the big place in the Blue Chain is the one called The Commodore, and it's run by a front-man, Carl Hagen. He's been in gambling all his life, a professional from a gambling town. He's a toughie all right, but so far he hasn't troubled us. It's the background I'm afraid of."

"I'm not sure I follow."

"Look at it this way. The people who use The Commodore are very different from Mott's lot—much more classy and much more flash. Which means, I'm afraid, that they're a whole lot less honest. Mott doesn't get many bad debts, you know—bring cash or a reference or you simply don't play. But the Blue Chain gets a load of them, stopped cheques and bouncers—"

"What do they do?" asked Russell.

"Persuasive gentlemen call on the defaulters."

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"How persuasive?"

"Just persuasive—so far. But you can see it's the seed of a serious situation. If it went the way that racing went, the shady end of racing..." Pell waved an expressive hand. "Professional frighteners, threats to men's families, muggings and the razors out—"

"I'd be happy not to be Harold Pell."

"And it might not stop at that, you know. Look what happened in parts of the States. Rival syndicates smashing each other up, their casinos, the men who worked for them. It could happen here."

"Seriously?"

"What's to stop it? It's a pattern and patterns repeat themselves. There are some odd ones working in The Commodore though so far no serious criminals. But this Hagen knows his way around; he could easily find himself hoodlums if he wanted to."

"To smash up Mott's place?"

"Perhaps not to start with. More likely a series of incidents. Get Stacks a bad name, frighten away the customers. And talking of Mott, you called to ask for dope on him, but you haven't told me why yet."

"Nothing mysterious—I wanted his history. Mott came to see me the other day and I've a hunch he'll be calling this morning. I like to know my clients."

"Clients?"

"Or contact men."

"He said he was calling for somebody else?"

"He said he came from the Prime Minister."

"You believed him?"

"I did."

"So would I, sir," said Harold Pell.

Russell walked back to the Executive contentedly. His elliptical little chats with Harold Pell were mostly fruitful. He'd got the background he'd gone for and it had solidly impressed him. Mott had made his first money as a very young man, then the sharks had moved in and he'd fought them. Successfully too, using lawyers as a last resort. Charles Russell chuckled. A splendid man, a man to approve. A strange friend for a Prime Minister? Russell didn't think so and nor had Harold Pell, for what held men together was not the things they liked but the things they hated, and Mott and Robert Fletcher would have enemies in common. Jim Mott

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was a solid citizen, but of a type which hadn't existed in Russell's youth. He was rich, yet with no social ambitions whatever. But Jim Mott had enemies, the men who had tried to take him. And Fletcher? Charles Russell grimaced. The Prime Minister, too, had enemies, men dedicated to his downfall. One in particular—and Pell had just mentioned him. Mott's money would have been useful too, as was still his shining loyalty.

Mott was waiting when Russell got back.

Russell said pleasantly, "What can I do for you?"

"I'm damned if I really know." Jim Mott was looking miserable.

"You've come from the Prime Minister again?"

Mott nodded. He began talking unhappily, all his instincts to lay the matter firmly down, but his brief on it quite inadequate to do so.

Russell was sorry for him, listening with patience he'd have shown to few other men. By degrees it began to emerge that he was being asked to do something, something about Victor Demuth. Russell interrupted mercifully: "The Prime Minister wants the Executive to take some action about Victor Demuth?" His tone was easy, the reverse of inquisitorial. Jim Mott had been treated abominably and Russell was trying to help him.

"I'm clear enough on that bit."

"We've done everything we possibly can, everything we're allowed to."

"I know. *He* knew. It wasn't that."

"Then what was the proposition?"

"Damned if I know," Mott said again. "There was a lot of talk about the Executive—your network, your international friends."

"And a suggestion I should use them?" Russell was making it easy again.

"I suppose that was it. You've a rather special relationship with a rather special security man. The boss, in fact, where Demuth is going."

Charles Russell was gently furious. Certainly he had a special relationship with a very special security chief, but it wasn't one where either side asked favours of the other. It was a relationship of power, of mutual profit. Russell and his Colonel-General friend played a delicate game of ball—but ask him a favour—absurd! Why the hell should he grant a favour? They'd taken a deal of trouble to get Victor Demuth

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to their country and, once they'd got him, they'd exploit him with proper ruthlessness. If Russell rang the Colonel-General he'd write off the Executive as a serious partner in world politics. There was an account between the two of them—debits and credits. You scratch my back in the Trucial States and I'll scratch yours in Rio. The relationship was extremely valuable, not something to risk on the misconception of a Prime Minister.

Russell said succinctly: "No."

"No what?"

"No dice. I've a special relationship but I'm not going to use it."

"You mean you won't help us?"

"I can't."

But as things worked out, it wasn't necessary.

IT was cold outside, but the room itself was heated to a temperature that most would have found excessive. It was a splendid room, for it had been built for an emperor. The five men now in it weren't emperors, but collectively had a power which many emperors would have envied. Four were in civilian clothes, suits which looked as though they had been cut with an axe, the fifth in a uniform much better fitting, even an elegant uniform.

They were discussing Victor Demuth. A British Member of Parliament was still somebody, but there were gradings and ranks in somebodies. The Colonel-General began to describe Demuth in terms that would have wounded him. He was a back-bencher, a professional rebel with private means, but shorn of all sense of discipline. What could he do if they let him in which he couldn't do also in England? And as for the fact that he'd come to them, what was that worth in the hard coin of publicity? It would have been different if he'd been a Minister. He edited *The Podium*, but no-one who mattered read it. The British were pretty soft by now, but they weren't quite idiots.

At last, the meeting broke up with handshakes and bows; then the Colonel-General and his assistant took a car through the snow to their office. The Colonel-General was looking pleased. He hadn't much wished to be lumbered with Victor Demuth. And he had another good reason for the half-smile he was allowing himself: he considered that Harriet Demuth had exceeded her instructions. Certainly she hadn't referred

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to him, and that was an impertinence. In the Colonel-General's vocabulary, bourgeois was a dirty word, but he had at least one conviction that was still entirely bourgeois. It was that a sharp spell of manual labour did no harm to too-clever women. Preferably, in a cold climate.

Back in his room he turned to his subordinate. "Where is he now?"

"Demuth? They've got him as far as East Berlin and he's due to arrive tomorrow."

"Meet his plane. Send him back. The first flight available. Never mind what line it is. The first."

The assistant made a note of it.

"And there's another thing, too. Check arrival time at London, then telephone it to the Executive."

The assistant's jaw dropped an inch.

"Don't stand there like an owl. I'm on excellent terms with the Security Executive when our interests aren't actively clashing. That's oftener than you'd think, my friend. So ring a man called Mortimer there—he'll pass it on to Russell. Who will no doubt arrange to meet Demuth." He added, "Colonel Russell's our enemy, our second professional enemy. I'd destroy him if I got the chance and be very pleased to do it. But he's also a private friend of mine and I'm flattered by the friendship."

Victor Demuth was more tired than he had ever been, moving dumbly in a mist of unreality, uncertain of day and night. Was it three days since he had started? He could remember a little airplane, a dawn landing in a deserted field, then a seemingly endless ride in a car. It had been hideously cold and he hadn't been properly dressed for it. Then a train and a car again, finally another aircraft. He'd been watered and fed like an animal and never, for an instant, left alone. Sometimes there'd been one man, more often two. Nobody had talked to him. At first he'd been angry, then later he'd been frightened.

Now he climbed from the aircraft stiffly, a guard on either side of him. He hadn't quite known what he ought to expect —hardly the President to greet him—but he hadn't expected *nothing*. This total lack of interest was intimidating. He walked between his guards across the snow, over cleared concrete, up a gangway enclosed by glass.

A man was standing by an open door in the corridor at the top. Victor Demuth hesitated. One of the guards pushed him

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roughly. He staggered into the little room, crossing his shaky legs. He fell. The door slammed behind him.

He waited two hours with his mounting fear. They'd taken his luggage, or he'd have doped himself with sleeping pills. Without warning a judas opened. An arm appeared and a tray of food. There was soup and he wolfed it, and a bottle of beer. He drank that too, though he was craving something stronger.

When finally they came for him, they had to shake him roughly and he woke like an animal, snarling. The taller guard was holding a passport. He hadn't uttered a word on the journey, but now he spoke excellent English. "I very much regret," he said, "that your passport is not in order."

Victor was silent—the anti-climax had shattered him. He'd been expecting interrogation, the sort of thing he thundered against; he'd been expecting the knout, Siberia...

"There are formalities about visas," the other guard said, "you have not complied with them."

"But—"

"You didn't even try to."

"But how could I? I—"

They cut him short indifferently, each taking an arm... Down the endless glaring corridor, down the glassed-in gangway. They walked across the concrete again to the foot of an aircraft's gangway.

One guard gave his suitcases to a steward. He said on a note of irony, "We held this flight specially for you."

The other gave Victor his night-bag, his passport and a ticket. "Change at Brussels for London, and there'll be two hours to wait." He gave Demuth a push again, a little less violent this time, but equally contemptuous. It shot him four steps up the gangway.

Demuth staggered, but recovered himself. Above was a lighted door, a stewardess smiling politely. She greeted him in French but he didn't hear. He stumbled to his seat and, on a reflex, fixed his safety belt. He had the night-bag on his knees and he fumbled with it shakily... Yes, they were there still. He swallowed three tablets greedily, then another to be sure of it.

The approved dose was two.

CHARLES RUSSELL was visiting Stacks, filling in on Mott's background. What better place than Mott's own casino?

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He'd been signed in by Robert Mortimer who, though gambling bored him, was a member of several gaming clubs at the Executive's expense.

It was seven in the evening, rather early for the showier casinos, but Stacks was already crowded. Russell looked round the room. There were pilasters spaced along the walls, their capitals beheaded barbarously by the artificially-lowered ceiling. The lighting was low, informal and homely. The place reminded him of a favourite restaurant, which some years back had been the automatic choice of prosperous couples from suburbia up for an evening of innocent fun. There'd been the same sort of lighting, an identical atmosphere and two competent pianists playing the jazz of the golden age. Very different, Russell reflected, from a place like The Commodore. The people were different and much better mannered. These comfortable middle-class couples were having fun.

Russell walked to a roulette table. A man had just picked two chips up and a neighbour protested mildly. The first man apologised, passing him the winnings without question. There were two croupiers to a table but there wasn't a *chef* in sight. A *chef* wasn't necessary, since any unpleasantness was unthinkable. He strolled into the *chemin de fer* room.

A waiter came up with a tray of champagne and Russell decided to risk it. The wine was good and he was properly impressed. In the chemmy room the atmosphere was perhaps a little more professional. Russell wandered back to the roulette room, noticing that Bob Snake had come on duty. He was calling the wheel in croupier French and he smiled at Russell in welcome. If he was surprised, he didn't show it. Charles Russell smiled back.

Snake was his favourite nephew. The others bored him intolerably. They were admirable young men who could have married Gina Demuth tomorrow. That ass Victor could hardly have objected to them, whereas he loathed this splendid Snake. Gina was still a minor and it would have been useless to go to a court for special permission. Bob Snake had been in Borstal and croupiers weren't magistrates' meat. Very sensibly, in the circumstances, Bob and Gina had quietly decided to live together. They were saving, they could wait.

Russell bought some chips and had begun to play, absent-mindedly, when Mortimer touched his sleeve. Russell turned in surprise. "I thought you'd got bored and gone back to the Executive?"

"I did—now I'm here again."

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Russell looked at Mortimer, then followed him without speaking. He left his winnings on the table, but the second croupier brought them out to him. Russell thanked him politely, but he didn't cash his chips; he put them in his pocket and went with Mortimer. There was a car outside and Russell noticed it was the fast one. In the back he asked: "Well?"

"There's been a message from a friend of yours. It came to me personally, but I was meant to pass it on."

"What friend?"

Mortimer told him.

"So?"

Mortimer drew a deliberate breath. "Victor Demuth arrived where he was going. For some reason I wasn't favoured with, he's also coming back again. They've put him on a Belgian plane—for Brussels, through ticket to London." Mortimer looked at his watch. "Heath Row," he said, "and we'll just about make it."

The stewardess hadn't liked it much. The passenger had his belt on still and he was slumped against it, snoring. She'd offered him a meal, but he hadn't woken.

When they landed at Brussels, however, the change of height

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woke Victor mercilessly—mercilessly, because it dragged him back into a real world which was wholly terrifying.

He stumbled from the aircraft, clutching his bag.

In the transit lounge his mind cleared slowly. The more it cleared, the more terrified he became. If he went back to England he'd be finished. They'd force him to ask for the Hundreds, resign his Parliamentary seat. Even the board of *The Podium* would scarcely support him further. His career would be ended finally. And there was more to it than the negative loss. He'd left the country irregularly. Was it really a crime? What could you get for it; what did they give you? Not, he thought miserably, that this was relevant in the circumstances. He'd taken a thousand pounds in notes with him and he knew that that was criminal.

He shuffled to the passport control and exit. He still had his bag and he fished his passport out of it.

The official at the control desk gave the passport an indifferent glance, one rather less indifferent at the almost fainting Victor. This Englishman was clearly drunk, excited, and irresponsible. It wasn't the Belgian's business to interfere with drunken Englishmen, but he'd been told to keep out trouble since English teenagers had wrecked Ostend. He said, playing for time, "What flight did you get in on, please?"

Victor gave him the number.

"But that arrived half an hour ago."

"I know. It was late. I am travelling on to London but I'd prefer to go on tomorrow."

The official hesitated and Victor began to sweat again. He could be asked for a landing card and, as a through-booking, he didn't have one; he shouldn't have left the transit lounge.

The official considered gloomily. The whole affair was irregular and he had a stolidly Belgian loathing of the irregular. Moreover, it was very late—a young wife awaited him. This Englishman was quite horribly drunk; he might fly off the handle, demand to see the supervisor, perhaps telephone to his consul. There'd be arguments, all for nothing since this man had a valid passport... "Is that all your luggage?"

"That's all."

The official gave Victor his passport back. "May I give monsieur a small advice? Monsieur should not drive a car."

"Goodnight," Victor said.

He had had no intention of driving a car. He cleared his bag with a half-asleep Customs man, and walked straight to the station in the basement. There was a train in ten minutes

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and he took it to the town terminal. He knew what he must do and how.

This was the end of the road.

From the terminal he walked, now almost steadily, up the slope from rue Cardinal Mercier and found a small hotel. He booked himself in, explaining that he was very tired. He wasn't to be disturbed until he woke. No telephone calls, no coffee—nothing.

Once in his room, he undressed quickly. He would have liked to hear Gina's voice again and for a second he picked up the telephone. But he put it down promptly for he didn't know what to say to her. His political will and testament, some farewell message? But he shrank from that, for he wasn't quite inconsiderate.

He took out his tablets, counting them carefully. He'd have been happier with rather more, but what he had left should do it. He swallowed them with water, then lay down on the narrow bed.

Charles Russell had a reputation for imperturbability but, when the flight arrived without Victor Demuth, Mortimer saw him shaken. He recovered with discipline and sent for the aircraft's captain, but the captain couldn't help. He'd had thirty-nine passengers booked, but one had failed. It had happened before and would happen again.

Mortimer made for a telephone but, with a rare gesture of irritation, Russell stopped him. Mortimer was an excellent officer, fully competent to do what was obvious, competently. Such as ringing up Brussels and recovering Demuth, such as blowing the story wide open. It wasn't as simple as that—Russell wished that it were. He went back to the Executive's car, lit a cigar and thought.

He began to eliminate the more extravagant guesses, and arrived at the conclusion that Demuth had got off at Brussels voluntarily.

Why?

Charles Russell could guess with great accuracy what Demuth had been thinking. He got off at Brussels and had gone into hiding there. He was an unstable man, given to taking too many barbiturates. On the record it looked quite possible that he might be going to his forefathers.

But where was he?

If Mortimer telephoned, Demuth would be found and the balloon would have gone up and out of sight beyond hope of

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pulling it down again. It would be a field day for the Press of half the world.

It might be much easier to let Demuth die.

Charles Russell firmly shook his head. It wouldn't do, it really wouldn't. Demuth's name would still be listed for a flight from much farther east, and whatever story you fed to them, the Press would be bound to check it. Russell had a healthy respect for journalists and, as a result, the best relations with them.

This wasn't a moral problem at all, nothing so exhausting as a plain choice between right and wrong. It was a matter of timing, and Russell could handle it. He wouldn't let Mortimer telephone, since he was paid to avert the scandal which inescapably would have followed, but he wouldn't let Victor Demuth die, either.

There was a reasonable compromise, sensible practical action. Charles Russell began to take it. He told the driver to go back to the Executive, picked up the radio telephone from its cradle, telling the duty officer to ring a Madame van Eller in Brussels. She was to be relayed through to the moving car. Her number was in the Red Book and the duty officer might refer to it.

She came through in ten minutes, a sleepy voice. "Charles Russell? Elizabeth here."

"I've got a job for you, a quick one."

"I don't work for you now." But she said it unresentfully. She was Executive-trained, and once in the Executive you never quite lost the taste for it. Charles Russell was aware of this, was indeed backing it confidently.

"Listen." And he gave her the facts.

"He sounds a pretty hot property."

"The understatement of the year, my dear."

"How do I find him?"

"Well... He came in at Brussels airport. It's roughly even money he took the train, and in that case he won't have gone far. Start at the town terminal, rue Cardinal Mercier. Work the smaller hotels. It's a chance—"

"It's a chance." There was a pause again. "And you say he may be dying of an overdose of sleeping pills. What about a doctor?"

"Do you know one you can trust?"

"I'll ask my husband."

There was a rumbling exchange in Flemish and Russell was glad to hear it. Flemings are people who hold their tongues.

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The line came alive again. "There's my brother-in-law."

"I didn't know he was a doctor."

"He's a professor at the university—he hasn't practised for years. But he's got a black bag still."

"You can trust him?"

"For money. He's a Belgian."

"Say a monkey—five hundred?"

"Wait. Suppose I do find this man of yours—how do we get in without making a thing of it?"

"He's got a daughter—you're her."

"And my brother-in-law, the doctor?"

"Is his son-in-law, of course. I'm going to the Executive now. Ring me there and good luck." Russell hung up, and at the Executive went to his room. He sent for coffee and waited.

The call came through with the pale February dawn. Elizabeth van Eller was elated, but she was hiding it. Old habits died hard. "We've got him," she said. "The third hotel we tried. There was a moment with the porter, though—he'd left orders that he wasn't to be disturbed. I'm glad you thought of that daughter bit. He was doped to the eyes. We just got him back."

"And now?"

"Now we're playing the cards he so thoughtfully provided. He'd told the porter he was very tired and the porter thought he looked really ill. I dare say he'd taken a shot before he arrived there. So what more natural than for a daughter to take him home?" She chuckled, "I'm a very good daughter—he seems to trust me."

"You're a very good operator."

"Thank you—kind words. From a source I shall always value. He can travel in a day or two. Send a man out for him."

"I'll send Mortimer."

"My old square Mortimer? I'd like to see that man again."

RUSSELL's report was lying on the Prime Minister's desk and he read and absorbed it both quickly and efficiently. The situation could be held, he thought. If Victor Demuth had killed himself in Brussels, every newspaper in London and a good many others would have sent a man after the story. Instead, Russell had got to Demuth in time and had quietly brought him back again. Demuth was now at 80 Welbeck

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Street in a highly respectable nursing-home of which Charles Russell was principal patron. Moreover, Demuth was still genuinely sick. But he wouldn't be sick for ever, and when he left Welbeck Street he would still be potential news.

Russell's report hadn't tried to hide this fact. It had been impossible to conceal that Demuth had disappeared for five days, breaking public engagements and leaving no contact; it was known too, that his wife had simply vanished.

There would be a story in that when Demuth left his nursing-home. A sensible man would have known how to handle it . . . My wife—I looked for her. I was very upset and I couldn't face my work or friends. Then I broke down and had to have treatment . . . But Demuth, once they got him, might spill the whole story in its most shattering form to the first sympathetic journalist; he'd pose and he'd rant and he could bring down Robert Fletcher.

The Prime Minister frowned. Suppose the Queen's First Minister tackled Charles Russell of the Executive, suppose he appealed to him as one Englishman to another? Robert Fletcher had a well-founded respect for the Security Executive and he didn't doubt that if it suited Russell, Demuth would leave 80 Welbeck Street feet first.

But *would* that suit Russell? One couldn't risk a rebuff in a matter so delicate. Reluctantly the Prime Minister shook his head. Victor wasn't dangerous, he was simply a fool, an embarrassment . . . To whom? Hardly to the Executive, hardly to national security. He could bring down a Prime Minister, but Russell wouldn't play ball with that.

The Prime Minister had an even more potent motive for smothering immediate scandal: he had decided on a general election, and until he was safely in again he'd be even more vulnerable. Afterwards, it would be different, much more manageable from the firm basis of a new mandate. How long, he thought—three weeks? Could Russell hold Victor in Welbeck Street, away from the newspapers, for three weeks? This was a question that could be put to him, not like the other, and Jim Mott was the man to put it. No doubt it meant telling Mott everything, since a confidential emissary would look less than entirely impressive if a couple of awkward questions showed he wasn't quite confidential. That was a risk, but Jim Mott was reliable, and in any case nobody's fool; he knew some of it already and might guess the rest.

Besides, Robert Fletcher's private information was that Mott and Russell had something close to friendship, which multiplied

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Mott's usefulness. Fletcher's debt to James Mott was increasing alarmingly.

Charles Russell had reservations when Mott went to see him. He would do what he'd been asked to, but he doubted if it would meet the case. Something was known, inevitably—enough to whet Press appetites. Victor Demuth had disappeared for five days and Demuth had a reputation. He would be a valuable property. To the Press—the wrong part of it: to the man Pell had called the Squire, for one, with *The Freeman*, as well as magazines and a block of shares in a programme company; and who had interests in the world of films . . .

And who hated Fletcher bitterly; would do anything to bring him down.

THE man they called the Squire was wanting to use the telephone, but his wheelchair had slipped out of range of the table. He began to work it nearer, using his left arm only, his mouth a thin line since the action increased his pain. He was almost always in pain. He couldn't use both hand-wheels so he had to shunt forwards, then back again. He could have rung for a servant, even for Lady Elena, but he hated his dependence. Somehow he made the telephone.

Once he'd had everything, everything a man of his class and age could reasonably or unreasonably desire. He'd been a considerable and successful landowner, his estate a modern business, highly-capitalised, intensively farmed and prosperous; he'd fought in a war with distinction and a DSO; he'd married a beautiful woman.

Then this hell-begotten virus which left the doctors impotent had destroyed him.

The wealth he had accumulated since then, the new interests he had made himself, were surrogates, no better, for the life he had known and lost. He'd have given his fortune gladly for a single day he'd been happily born to—to ride around his land, to shoot, to share a bedroom with his wife again.

She came in now, quietly, wearing the elegant casual uniform of the upper-class English countrywoman—tweed skirt, twin-set, and superlative shoes superlatively polished. She was forty-ish but still beautiful.

"Would you like some coffee?"

"If it isn't too much trouble."

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He treated her with a courtesy which in any other circumstances would have been insulting. It was defensive and he knew it, but he wouldn't have her pity. He knew that she loved him, was faithful still; he was proud of it with a bitter pride.

... No, anything but her pity.

She slipped away and he returned to the file on the bracket they clipped to his chair. It was a report from the editor of *The Freeman* and the Squire read it carefully. *The Freeman* provided him with a platform. It lost a little money, but the magazines and TV shares more than paid for the modest loss and even if they hadn't, The Commodore and his other interests in the gambling world had made money almost meaningless.

He was happy to pay for his platform. He let the editor of *The Freeman* run the paper, but on one matter he gave the orders. That matter was the Prime Minister. The Squire hated Robert Fletcher. He read the report again. His editor was resourceful and tough and he had a very free hand to edit but so far as Fletcher was concerned he knew exactly where he stood. His duty was to report and he'd reported. It was a single sheet of paper.

> *You will have heard of Victor Demuth. Demuth is a back-bencher and the Prime Minister is having trouble with his back benches.*
>
> *Demuth disappeared for five days. His wife has left him and has also disappeared.*
>
> *The wife is still untraced but Demuth is now in a nursing-home. It is a genuine nursing-home but is also a hide-away where the Security Executive has been known to deposit embarrassing persons who are too well-known for directer methods.*

The Squire considered, then picked up one of the telephones. He didn't need to dial it since the line went direct to the editor. It cost a great deal of money, but was worth it. He said, "I have your note."

"Which one?"

"The one about Demuth, of course."

"And so?"

The Squire said simply, "Get the story."

"Which every other paper has tried to do. He's being held incommunicado. Nobody can get to him, they say he's too sick—"

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"I said get the story."

The line gave out the faintest sigh. "Then how far can I press it?"

"You could get in touch with Hagen, my manager at The Commodore."

There was a startled silence for some time. The editor knew about Hagen, who was unscrupulous to put it mildly. Playing for time to think he asked, "You think Hagen has information?"

"No. But I know he has connections."

"I know that, too," the editor said. He didn't sound outraged or shocked for he was accustomed to arbitrary proprietors. "And what shall I tell Hagen if I get in touch with him?"

"*When* you get in touch with him. Just tell him what I'm telling you. Tell him to get the story."

Chief Superintendent Pell was worrying, but not about Victor Demuth. Russell, as was his habit, had given him the basic facts. He knew that Demuth was back, hidden discreetly in what he thought of as Russell's rat-house. Excellent. He needn't give the affair any more thought.

Nevertheless he was worried, and what worried him was gambling. The world of gaming was a strange one. Part of it was respectable, even bourgeois—Stacks in particular; part was flashy and therefore suspect—such, for instance, as The Commodore. The rest was simply sleazy and always had been. The trouble was that a mildly futile entertainment had become a vast industry. Almost by accident, London had become the capital of the gambling world.

Pell was talking now to a man called Leclerc. He was a negro from what had once been a French colony in West Africa, but he'd lived all his life in France and spoke no other languages but French and a little English. He was a professional croupier of standing, who'd been tempted across the Channel to a profitable position in The Commodore. He was also Pell's ear into a world that was increasingly disturbing him. So Pell was questioning Leclerc as to the chance of some large-scale coup in the gaming world.

The negro was very polite, but sceptical.

"You're telling me one can't rig a wheel?" Pell asked.

"Who would do it? So far as the house is concerned, it takes elaborate precautions to make sure its wheels *aren't* fiddled."

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"And the croupiers?"

"Ah, the croupiers—now you're getting nearer reality. A croupier might fix a wheel, though he'd have to be clever to do it without being spotted, but he'd still have to have a partner, a man who knew the fixing and how to lay his stakes accordingly. It's happened, but it's unhealthy—especially unhealthy for the croupier."

"And short of actually fixing the wheel?"

"You mean *throwing* it crooked, somehow controlling it?" Leclerc considered before he answered; at length he said carefully, "You've got a wheel spinning one way, a ball rolling another. The ball doesn't always drop directly—it can hit a division and jump clear across the wheel—and there are knobs on the bowl as there are pins on a pin table. You believe a croupier could pick, say, Eleven, and throw into it consistently in those circumstances?"

"I can see it wouldn't be easy."

"It would be flatly impossible. Just the same, I've heard stories. There are supposed to be men who can throw into a *voisin* of eight numbers, say Zero to Twenty-five. Naturally not all the time, but just often enough to weight the odds."

Leclerc showed his splendid teeth again. "I've been throwing on a wheel for twenty years and I'm certainly not one of them. Even if I were, it would still be like a mechanical fiddling—I'd still need a friend to do the betting. And a smart *chef* might spot it. Take that *voisin* from Zero to Twenty-five—that's seven numbers besides the Zero. The man doing the betting would be backing all eight *en plein* of course, but he'd have a small edge on some combinations, too. Four of the seven numbers are red against three black, two are in the second dozen, and there are three in the first column against two in each of the others. None of those *mises* pays sensationally, but all pay. A lot of people bet in patterns, but steady play on eight numbers which happen to form a *voisin* isn't something you see every day. As I say, a smart *chef* might wonder."

"So the customers might try to cheat the house, but the house doesn't cheat the customers?"

"Oh yes it does—or can. But not in the way you're thinking. There are several ways of fiddling which I'm certainly not telling you. I really don't have to, because in the end they're self-defeating. You don't last long once you get that reputation. The customers go elsewhere."

"And The Commodore's doing pretty well?"

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"Pretty fair," Leclerc said.

He had answered promptly but impersonally, not lacking conviction but equally without emphasis. Harold Pell watched him closely, but the impassive black face was giving nothing away. Pell's information was that The Commodore had begun to slip, but he was satisfied now that no betting coup was brewing.

The next piece of information he wanted was more delicate, and he began to probe cautiously. "What happens if the customers try to pull things on the house?"

"You mean claiming bets they haven't made? Slipping one on too late? We can deal with that."

"Who deals with it?"

The negro said ironically, "Well-dressed young toughs Monsieur Hagen retains for the purpose."

"Oh them," Pell said. He didn't take them seriously.

Leclerc looked at Pell in turn, half curious, half pitying. "You're getting the emphasis wrong," he said. "We don't lose much money by misconduct at the tables. What Hagen loses money on is bad debts. Not that we invariably go after them. Why should we?" He leaned forward, explaining patiently: "We get a bounced cheque for a hundred pounds, but what have we really *sold* for it? Some chips made of plastic worth a hundred on the tables and a matter of pennies outside. That's part of the philosophy, so we don't go after chicken-feed. But the big ones—"

"What happens?"

"You know the law. A gambling debt isn't recoverable, but if the debtor compounds it—I mean comes to some arrangement to pay it back—then the arrangement may be a contract and enforceable."

"You've been getting many big bouncers of late?"

Leclerc said softly, "I've heard something like that."

"Then I'm really very grateful—we'll keep in touch." The Chief Superintendent saw the negro out, politely. He didn't offer him money, for Leclerc was paid monthly by cash into his bank account.

When he had gone, Pell frowned. He didn't mistrust what Leclerc had told him: the negro had always been reliable and on one aspect he'd said nothing new. Well-dressed young toughs, Pell thought with contempt: chuckers-out in a flash casino, debt-chasers outside it. That was credible but it didn't fit easily with his other information, received from one of his Inspectors, that two much more formidable characters had

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come back into circulation. They were men with convictions for extortion, criminals of some standing in the class-conscious world of crime. The word on the grapevine was that their new money was coming from Hagen.

To Harold Pell, this piece didn't fit. He rang up Charles Russell, who thanked him sincerely, since to the Executive such news was significant.

Demuth was safe under watch in Welbeck Street, Russell reflected, but there'd be people sweating blood to get his story, which could cause an appalling row—even bring down the Government. And Fletcher had enemies, many and varied enemies. *The Freeman* was one of them and the Squire owned *The Freeman*. He also owned The Commodore where Hagen was his manager, and if Pell was right—he mostly was—Hagen was in touch with two professionals . . .

Demuth was in 80 Welbeck Street, but he also had a daughter. She was a level-headed young woman, well equipped to take care of herself, and Snake was helping her. Up to now, they'd been more than a match for the journalists who'd been chasing them. But these new men weren't journalists . . . Conviction for extortion. There was an ominously wide variety of extortion.

Russell sent for Mortimer, giving him the instructions that he now considered necessary.

As it happened, he was an hour too late.

STACKS gaming club was run with a quiet propriety. The rule was cash and it was strictly enforced—no bouncing cheques, no persuaders, no complications outside the cosy rooms. Perhaps it was too profitable—too tempting in a cut-throat world. If Stacks went to the wall, then the other less paying casinos would take its customers.

Stacks didn't have disturbances. Jim Mott kept a first-class manager, but he was as different from Hagen as a manager could conceivably be—one chosen for his social skills, the ability to build atmosphere. He'd be out of his depth if trouble came or he'd play into its maker's hands and send for the police to heighten it. Mott didn't hold this against him, since he'd hired him for a particular job. Not for a moment was he thinking of counter-action. Nothing could be more fatal than to start a sort of armaments race. But he was good at scenting trouble and the smell of it was increasing. The word on the grapevine was that The Commodore was slipping

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down, giving far too much credit and, much worse, losing customers.

Jim Mott thought it over. Warning was what he needed now, some hint how the cards were falling. Bob Snake, he thought—he'd talk to him. He was a man who kept his eyes open and he'd notice any change in the kind of people who came to Stacks.

Mott reached for the telephone but there was no answer from Bob's number. Mott remembered he'd been given time off to look after his girl. The Press were being a nuisance about her father. He looked up Gina's number and tried again.

The number rang four times before a man's voice answered. It wasn't Bob Snake's.

"Yes?" the voice said.

"I want to speak to Miss Gina Demuth."

"I'm sorry, she's busy."

There was something about the voice that Mott didn't like. He barked briefly: "And who are you?"

"We're the police."

"The police?"

"Just routine inquiries."

Mott was suddenly on his feet and breathing hard. The receiver was dangling—he left it to dangle. What he'd heard was a woman's scream.

By now Gina Demuth was used to reporters. There'd been a flood of them on her doorstep, everything from the smoothies to the men who put their foot in, and when the telephone rang she left it. Snake had sat with her on most days, but now the pestering was decreasing she had told him to take an evening off.

Nevertheless, when the doorbell rang she went to the door reluctantly. She'd developed a simple technique and applied it now. Snake had unscrewed the letter-box and she could peep through the slit.

There were two of them this time and Gina asked warily, "What do you want?"

An authoritative voice said pleasantly, "Don't worry, we're not the Press. We're police."

Gina Demuth hesitated, for the assertion wasn't a new one. They'd come in all shapes and sizes and they'd claimed to be almost everything—firemen, men to read the gas meter, even a doctor she didn't have.

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She said, still uncertain, "How do I know you're really policemen?"

"You're quite right to ask, miss. Just hold that flap open, please."

A card came through it smoothly and Gina read it. It was a well-printed piece of cardboard, thumbed and by no means new, and the rubric over an indecipherable signature said the bearer was Detective Inspector Bett.

Gina opened the door and at once wished she hadn't. The men came in too quickly. The taller shut the door behind him and the shorter stood over her while the other checked the bedroom.

He returned and said, "The girl's alone."

"Good." The shorter man moved menacingly close to Gina. "Talk," he said. "Give."

It wasn't any good, she knew, but she might as well play for time. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"None of that. I'm talking about your father. He's in a nursing-home now, but he disappeared for five days. And your stepmother's vanished, too."

"I don't know where she's gone—I couldn't care less."

But the man wasn't interested in Harriet. "Damn your stepmother. I want to know where your father's been, I want the whole story."

Gina didn't answer and the shorter man struck her. He struck her face once with the flat of his hand, then, coming back, with the now-closed fist.

Gina staggered against the fireplace, fell. An ornament slipped off the mantelpiece, smashing to pieces noisily in the grate.

"Talk, damn you, talk."

Gina had started to sob, but she didn't speak. The shorter man pulled her up and struck again. He had picked his spot carefully and Gina stopped sobbing. She couldn't sob, she couldn't breathe. She was utterly terrified, but she wasn't yet broken.

The other man said, "Steady, Dick." He was far from a stranger to violence, but didn't love it for its own sake; he considered the short man both uncivilised and dangerous and normally he wouldn't have worked with him. But he'd needed the money badly and Hagen's money had been good. He said reasonably, unconsciously using a voice for an angry dog, "You don't want to knock her out, you know. We shan't get the story that way."

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"Mind your own bloody business."

"Well, give her a breather and try again."

The short man picked Gina up, throwing her casually on the sofa. She sprawled there, still fighting to catch her breath, and the short man again stood over her. "The bitch," he said, "the pretty dish."

The other man looked at him anxiously. He said uneasily, "Dick—"

"Shut your trap."

Gina had got her breath at last and the shorter man stared at her. His expression was hard to read, to place. It wasn't exactly cruel, certainly no crueller than the face of a man in a restaurant inspecting a plate of *hors d'œuvres* he relished . . . There'd be duck and green peas to follow.

He said again, almost gently now, "Talk, baby, tell me everything."

Gina didn't answer still.

The short man lit a cigarette, seating himself deliberately on the sofa at Gina's side. He bent her left wrist inwards till the skin was as taut as a bowstring. He blew the ash off his cigarette.

The telephone rang peremptorily.

The man on the sofa nodded towards the other. "You get that."

"But is it wise? Suppose—"

"Suppose it's her boyfriend—Hagen told us she's got a steady. We don't want him coming round here."

"Then what shall I say to whoever it is?"

"Tell him we're the police, of course." The short man smiled thinly. "Routine inquiries."

The taller man picked up the telephone, answering tautly. He was answering still as Gina screamed. He put back the telephone, turning, white-faced. The cigarette was back in the short man's mouth and his expression, now, was an open book.

Gina Demuth had fainted.

© William Haggard 1966

Next month: Charles Russell moves into top gear and flies to Belgium to foil the Prime Minister's attempt to ruin Mott

This Argosy serial is condensed from the novel "The Power House," which Cassell are to publish in September.

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BOOK REVIEWS

What is wrong with the novel today? Has it ceased to amuse, to move, or to entertain? What has happened to the life-line of the novel, the plot?

by WALLACE REYBURN

AS a novelist I have been annoyed at the meagre space given to fiction reviews. The "quality" Sunday papers devote several pages to book reviews, but often the week's novels are dismissed in a little round-up occupying only about as much space as is given to a single review of something such as *Across Darkest Africa With a Lighted Candle.*

It doesn't make sense, really, because which is the type of book more likely to survive—a novel or a non-fiction work? Take books such as *Jane Eyre, Wuthering Heights, Treasure Island, David Copperfield, A Passage to India, Gone With the Wind, Moby Dick, Of Human Bondage* . . . they are still with us, many years after publication. But of the vast number of non-fiction books published at the same time, how many are still around?

But of course those novels were written in the days when the novel was Something. Today, it seems unnecessary to state, the novel is in Bad Shape.

And I can tell you one reason for this, if it isn't, in fact, the main reason. Subject matter.

Take the batch of novels which confronts me for review this month. With rare exceptions, the themes are either tired and trite, unappealing or just plain silly.

Who would be prompted to lay out 25s. or thereabouts for novels with themes such as these:

(a) School teacher (a virgin, in her thirties), is weighed down by her recalcitrant pupils and having to look after her ailing

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mother. Come the summer holidays and she meets a man who takes her for a stroll down by the old mill stream . . . (Oh, not that one again!)

(b) A pair of aged twins are living their lives together. They go for interminable walks. One of them is soft in the head and is always playing with his marbles.

(c) The shiftless son of a rich man is always leaving his young wife and going back to her. The father of the young wife writes love letters to one of her girlfriends. (Believe me, that's *all* that this novel is about.)

Why bore you by outlining others? The thing is that the majority of the themes do not capture the imagination. They are just uninteresting.

And a basic reason for this is that the British novelist, by and large, writes off the seat of his pants. He writes subjectively, about what is to hand, instead of grasping hold of a good plot and strong characters and getting out there and researching them.

Too many British novelists of today regard themselves as literary figures. They should, instead, try to be craftsmen.

Something which underlined this in red ink for me was a quote I remember from Norman Collins. After publication of that bad novel of his, *Bond Street Story,* he regarded it as a matter of pride that the only research he had done for that story of a big department store was to spend twenty minutes being shown over such a store. If he had spent more time on it, he said, it would not have been a novel, it would have been journalism.

Good heavens, what on earth is wrong with journalism as applied to the novel? A journalist has at least learned his trade—how to put words together succinctly and tellingly, how to get meat into what he is writing. The average British novelist doesn't even have the two veg. It's meringue, meringue, all the way.

The Americans have no such contempt for "the journalistic approach." In the States newspaperdom is a recognised breeding-ground for top novelists. Just take these names: Mark Twain, O. Henry, Hemingway, O'Hara, Runyon, Gallico. All of them newspapermen. Plus countless others, such as Drury of *Advise and Consent,* Schulberg of *What Makes Sammy Run?* etc., etc.

If Norman Collins had used a newspaperman's approach to *Bond Street* he could have produced a terrific novel. There is, in fact, a wonderful theme for a department-store novel which

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has been lying around unused here in London for some years now. When Hugh Fraser took over Harrods, the chairman, who had been some sixty years with the firm, was demoted and at the first Board meeting under the Fraser regime, the ex-chairman had to sit at the same table with Fraser's son, made a director in his early twenties. What an explosive, dramatic situation—what a key scene around which to build a really forceful novel about big business!

There was no secret about this. It was in all the papers for any novelist to seize upon. But no British novelist has done anything about it. Nor has anything been done about the Clores, Cottons and Wolfsons of British big business. The *Executive Suite* type novel, such a strong part of American fiction, has no equivalent here.

Or London's Warren Street, is another example. There's a wonderful theme there going to waste. Just as Jerome Weidman in America got hold of New York's 30th Street rag-trade, what a novel—or series of novels, for that matter—could be written about the car dealers (and other people) in and around Warren Street.

There are so many strong themes going begging in England. Every day the newspapers bristle with plots and themes for novels. But the British novelist seems to turn his back on them. His yardstick for the plot of a novel seems to be: can I write it in an exercise book sitting under a tree?

Oh, well . . .

The Grey Seas of Jutland, by W. H. Canaway, is one of the rare exceptions I mentioned earlier. It is an excellent novel. But of course, Anglo-Welsh, 41-year-old Canaway, a former university lecturer, wrote *Sammy Going South*, so he knows what he is about. This one is warm, human, moving and, because he has done such a superb job of research, thoroughly evocative of the period of which he writes.

It tells of a boy growing up from the turn of the century on to 1919 and his part in the Jutland engagement. Its characters come right up off the page. The bullying Victorian father who tried to ear-box the boy into becoming, as he was, a parson. The maiden aunt who fixed it for him, through a youthful boy-friend who became an admiral, to realise his dream of joining the Navy. The unattainable girl of his youth. The German cousin he grew up with and, even though predictably, with whom he was confronted during the war.

These and others, equally well realised, are set in the

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atmosphere of "half sovs.," bathing machines, a candle to light one to bed, bodices and petticoats, 1903 Daimlers and Darracqs, and first lessons in sex gleaned by chance observation of serving-maid and chauffeur-gardener being earthy behind the summer-house.

The author catches so well the mood of pre-World War I and the days when the Navy was really something. The sort of novel you don't want to end, because you are *there*, in the middle of it. (Hutchinson, 25s.)

The Instant Saint, by John Sherlock. You may remember the first novel of this 32-year-old Englishman who now lives in America—*The Ordeal of Major Grisby*, which was a Book Society Choice. He writes extremely well. Here he is on the subject of a Schweitzer-type doctor who devotes himself to the refugees pouring over the border from Red China into Kashmir, and a professional fund-raiser in the United States who drums up the money to finance his work.

Is the doctor a saint or a fraud? We know the fund-raiser is a phony, and author Sherlock gives a vivid picture of all the hokum and artificially-aroused sentiment that surround American good-cause money raising. The novel is raw stuff, particularly in the passages dealing with the plight of the refugees, but gripping. (Hutchinson, 21s.)

A Jest of God, by Margaret Laurence. This is the one about the frustrated school teacher who is sexually awakened down by the river. A pity Miss Laurence chose this hackneyed theme, because she *can* write. A good sense of tension and urgency. Let's hope she picks a more rewarding plot next time. (Macmillan, 21s.)

The Croaking Raven, by Gladys Mitchell. My personal view is that, as a mystery writer, Gladys Mitchell is vastly superior to Agatha Christie and for this very good reason: she is readable. One gets interested in the Norman castle which Dame Beatrice and entourage take over for the summer as an unusual holiday place for grandson Hamish. The investigating of the murder of Thomas Dysey, former owner of the castle, doesn't strain one's sense of credibility, as I find Agatha Christie does. I am never far into a Christie offering before I have to say "Oh, no," and put the book aside. On the other hand, I was pleased to go right along with Miss Mitchell to the denouement. (Michael Joseph, 21s.)

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Terms of Reference, by Stanley Middleton. This is the afore-mentioned one about the rich man's son, a thoroughly uninteresting character who, for page after page, is involved in an on-again off-again marriage with his wife, an equally uninteresting type, while the parents on both sides confer about the see-saw marriage. This novel has nothing whatsoever to commend it, except the end, which comes, blessedly enough, on page 224. (Hutchinson, 25s.)

Game in Heaven With Tussy Marx, by Piers Paul Read. This is an experimental novel about a young man who attempts to be an English revolutionary, with comments along the way put into the mouth of Tussy, youngest daughter of Karl Marx.

Sample: "Split, her ski pants did . . . Then the equation, the law, the formula, is ready to be worked out. Pants divided by ski instructor; her pants, her skiing pants, her skiing pants already split, divided by the instructor; her pants, her underpants divided by the instructor; pants, all pants, his, hers, split ski, unsplit ski, under, over, black, green, white, divided by the French skiing instructor and the result equalled as complement, equated with as other half, placed before as couple, as mate, to the English daughter of a country clergyman who is so overwhelmed, overcome, come over, come upon, set upon . . ."

Earnest young Piers Paul Read, formerly of Yorkshire, now of the *Times Lit. Sup.,* will write a good novel some day. When he quits experimenting, that is.

(Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 21s.)

Gracious Living Limited is by Guy Bolton, who ought to be more famous than he is. My remembrance of him was merely as a name I'd often noticed on playbills in Shaftesbury Avenue. But he has, in fact, written 97 plays and musicals, among them such hits as "Rio Rita," "Anything Goes," "Sally," "Lady Be Good," "The Love Parade," "Anastasia." He was born in Hertfordshire, but for some years now he has lived in New York.

At 81 he has turned to the novel and this one—about a group of people in New York who start a cook-maid-butler service for people who wish to impress guests—I found pretty silly. But perhaps the old-fashioned style of writing had much to do with it.

Nowadays one writes "The dog bit her," *not* "Into Madame's calf he set his extremely useful dental equipment."

But he made one telling observation which for me made it

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worthwhile wading through the convoluted prose: "One of the best things that can be said for children is that they don't carry around pictures of their parents in their pockets to be whipped out and exhibited as a prize achievement."

(Herbert Jenkins, 18s.)

THE SHOOT, by Elleston Trevor. The Editor of *Argosy* and Mr. Ronald Duncan wish to express their regret that a recent review in these pages, of Elleston Trevor's latest novel, *The Shoot,* was misleading.

In his review Mr. Duncan cites *The Shoot* as an example of the modern novel which describes "a series of copulations between hard covers" in order "to shock." Since Mr. Trevor's novel certainly does not describe a series of copulations, the Editor and Mr. Duncan offer their apologies to the author.

NON-FICTION

At the Piano, by Ivor Newton. These are the memoirs of the world's greatest accompanist. I don't think he will disagree with that. He knew *everybody* in the music world, and here are 302 pages of revealing insights and anecdotes about such people as Melba, Chaliapin, Menuhin, Piatigorsky, Tetrazzini, Flagstad, Casals, Grace Moore and Gracie Fields.

I liked the chapter on Chaliapin, who could be a gay one when not driving his associates frantic with his fiery moods. "After a leisurely post-concert supper in Birmingham, it was almost impossible to convince him that a walk in search of Birmingham's night life at a quarter to midnight would be fruitless."

And teenager Menuhin discussing with all the assurance in the world the technicalities of the elderly Elgar's Violin Concerto, and the composer abruptly breaking off the discussion when he realised he would be late for a meeting in Newmarket —a race meeting, Elgar's other favourite pre-occupation . . .

And Sir Thomas Beecham, confronted with a snobbish English singer who had been trained in Italy and claimed she knew no songs in English: "Well, have a crack at the National Anthem and I'll prompt you when you break down . . ."

Dame Clara Butt: she was 6 ft. 4 ins. tall. She had a voice so like a man's that when people phoned and she answered,

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they always thought it was the butler. But when she let loose on "Land of Hope and Glory"! A critic said that the Albert Hall must have been built in anticipation of her coming into the world, because hers was the only voice that could fill it. Once, when she was singing there with the massed bands of the Brigade of Guards, the conductor was heard to shout: "Play up, boys, I can't hear you..."

And Ivor Newton's wide net takes in others besides musicians. For example, that immensely rich patron of the arts, the eighth Lord Howard de Walden, who was such a keen collector of arms and armour that he had a suit of armour made for himself. Wore it, too. Augustus John once called on him and was surprised to find him sitting in the billiard room in full armour, "reading *The Times* whilst waiting for Lady Howard to join him in investigating what possibilities of action and movement remained to anyone clad in shining armour."

Lord Howard commissioned John to paint his wife's portrait and paid the fee of a thousand guineas in advance. But after more than the usual number of sittings, John abandoned the portrait. "It varied from week to week," Lady Howard explained, "according to the appearance of whichever lady had most recently attracted him." (Hamish Hamilton, 30s.)

Out of the Sand, by Henry Maule, is the full story of General Leclerc and his fighting Free French during World War II. At the end of the war Leclerc (real name: Vicomte Philippe de Hauteclocque), had emerged as the most highly thought-of and most trusted of France's leaders. Frenchmen feel that the course of France's post-war history would have taken quite a different turn if Leclerc had not tragically lost his life.

(Odhams, 30s.)

Smugglers' Britain, by G. Bernard Wood. *The* complete guide on where to find smugglers' caves, hideouts, secret staircases, look-out windows, underground passages and all the other smuggleriana dotted around Britain's coasts.

(Cassell, 30s.)

Tomorrow's Sun, by Helen Joseph. The story told (at great risk, since the manuscript had to be smuggled out of South Africa) by the woman herself of her sentence to five years' house arrest and the anti-apartheid activities that led up to it.

(Hutchinson, 35s.)

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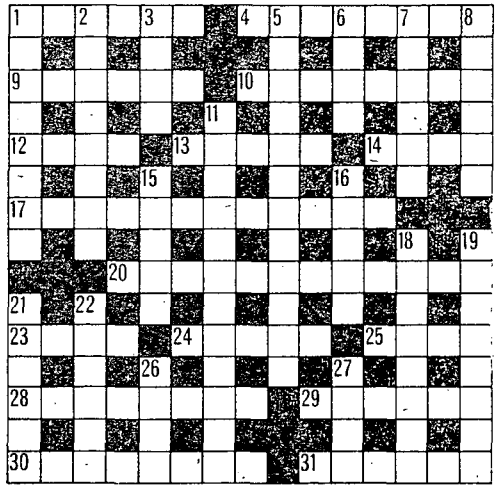
ARGOSY CROSSWORD

Solution next month



ACROSS

1 Reporter's copy lacking in substance? (6).

4 I'm put to the test and made better! (8).

9 A girl able to make one a meal (6).

10 Often with beer—one over the eight (8).

12 She casts away the suit he pressed! (4).

13 Broken idols in three dimensions (5).

14 Pure water? (4).

17 Rebellion based on a fortress near King's Lynn? (6, 6).

20 The negro maxim I chant is by no means encouraging! (12).

23 Boy lost in New Zealand (4).

24 Checks the punctuation marks (5).

25 Deserted port (4).

28 Team not made up of stars? (8).

29 Go to sea annoyed, maybe (3, 3).

30 Repeat, return a witty response (8).

31 Space-travellers that turn and look round? (6).

DOWN

1 Compact kind of pancake (8).

2 Ida, listen, you're a perfectionist! (8).

3 Go wrong about a pillow, perhaps (4).

5 Quick advice on how to turn out a good gingerbread biscuit! (4, 2, 6).

6 List of people brought up a hill? (4).

7 The stuff on which one flourishes (6).

8 —— awkward! (6).

11 Government department has shop-sign ? (5, 2, 5).

15 He hasn't the courage to stay and indulge in gibes! (5).

16 " Keeps Death his court, and there the —— sits " (*Richard II*) (5).

18 It doesn't go off immediately! (4–4).

19 In gems it arouses excitement (8).

21 Her saw cut through a cable! (6).

22 Short antithesis of soft down? (4, 2).

26 Uncle Remus' brother (4).

27 This spell of rowing has a certain attraction (4).

Printed in England by THE CHAPEL RIVER PRESS, ANDOVER, and published on the tenth of each month by FLEETWAY PUBLICATIONS LTD., FLEETWAY HOUSE, FARRINGDON STREET, LONDON, E.C.4. Subscription Rates: Inland £2 12s. for 12 months, £1 6s. for 6 months. Overseas, £2 11s. for 12 months, £1 5s. 6d. for 6 months. Agents: Australia and New Zealand, GORDON & GOTCH LTD.; South Africa, CENTRAL NEWS AGENCY LTD.; Rhodesia, Zambia and Malawi, KINGSTONS LTD. ARGOSY is sold subject to the following conditions, namely, that it shall not, without the written consent of the publishers first given, be lent, resold, or hired out, or otherwise disposed of by way of Trade, except at the full retail price as shown on the cover; and that it shall not be lent, resold, hired out, or otherwise disposed of in a mutilated condition or in any unauthorised cover by way of Trade; or affixed to or as part of any publication or advertising, literary or pictorial matter whatsoever.

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